

Tribute to William Still

Given at the Funeral

James Philip

We gather here today to give thanks to God for the life of William Still, and to pay tribute to, and honour, his memory as a man greatly loved and cherished in the fellowship of God's people in this place and far beyond it, in a ministry of upwards of fifty years. As a congregation, and as individuals, we bid farewell to a loving and faithful friend, colleague, and leader, and praise God for a ministry that has been so signally owned and blessed by him for so long.

I first met William Still when we were fellow students here at Aberdeen University in 1940. And I suppose that apart from his own family I have known him longer than almost any one in this gathering today. I was a serviceman in the Forces when he was inducted to this charge in 1945, and I well remember worshipping here in these early days and sensing the pulse of the Spirit as he preached from this pulpit at the beginning of a ministry that was to have an incalculable impact and

influence here in Aberdeen and far beyond.

There are times when we are best able, in trying to give an adequate impression of a notable and significant picture of a man of God and his work, to use the words of others, and this I would like to do now, as best I may, to convey just how important and indeed how seminal that work has been. John Buchan, the late Lord Tweedsmuir, once wrote of a great friend of his, and said of him:

It is not easy to draw on a little canvas the man whose nature is large and central and human. The very simplicity and wholesomeness of such souls defy an easy summary, for they are as spacious in their effect as daylight or summer... His presence warmed and lit up so big a region of life that in thinking about him one is overwhelmed by the multitude of things that he made better by simply existing among them. If you remove a fire from

Contents

- 1 Editorial
- 4 The Elder's Task
Eric Alexander
- 8 Train the Child
Annie Torrance
- 12 The Undecaying Power and
Grace of God
Thomas Guthrie
- 17 In Honour of the Father
Eugene Peterson
- 23 Postmodernism
Dominic Smart
- 29 Ann Allen meets
Alistair Begg
- 32 Book Reviews

a hearth, you will remember the look, not so much of the blaze itself, as of the whole room in its pleasant glow.

I have used these words on other occasions and of other people, but I can say without hesitation that they have never been more true than they are today in describing this dear man. For that is the kind of man William Still was. He was, as the famous statesman Earl Grey once said of his father, 'a man who lighted so many fires in cold rooms.'

Sir George Adam Smith, one time Principal of Aberdeen University, gives a graphic description in his

produced this? *Simply by arresting the drift.*

That is exactly how great men benefit human life. A great man serves his generation, serves the whole race by arresting the drift. Deadly forces, blind and fatal as the desert wind, sweep down human history. But into some soul God breathes a great breath of freedom, and the drift is arrested....

What has saved humanity has been the upraising of some great man to resist those drifts, to set his will, strong through faith, against the prevailing tendency, and be the shelter of the weaker, but not less desirous, souls of his brethren.

This has been the measure—and the significance—of what God has done with this man in these years. He has arrested the drift in our day and generation, in the exercise of his ministry in this place. He has spoken a word from the living God and by that word has arrested a dangerous drift in our national Church, and has brought immeasurable blessing in doing so to our land and beyond it. That is the kind of man he has been!

But there has been another side also, just as significant and important as his prophetic ministry from the pulpit. There has been the man himself, and the immense kindness and warmth of his personality. He has been a 'Barnabas' figure to so many. Barnabas in the New Testament was given a nickname, 'the son of consolation', the kind of man you felt it would be good to have around in any time of trouble. There was a kindness that made you feel that he really cared for you in your troubles, and that you would feel free to unburden yourself to, and be sure of having understanding and compassion. One would only have to

be here on a Sunday evening to realise that invariably there were those who wanted to come up to the table and speak with him after the service. That was the kind of man he was. He had a pastor's heart.

We are conscious that in our sorrow today we are united with his family and their sorrow, and we are grateful for the opportunity and the privilege of sharing that family sorrow today, with his sisters Barbara and Renee and his brother David, and their families. What must their sorrow be like, when we know the depth of our own? We pray tenderly for them, and as we know that our citizenship is in heaven, we also pray that the serenity and healing of that blessed place will encompass all earthly grief, theirs and ours, and transfigure it in a peace that passes all understanding.

Finally this: James Denney writes of the Apostle Paul in words that move the heart, as he speaks of what our Lord said to His disciples, 'Verily I say unto you, there is no man that hath left house, or wife, or brethren or parents, or children for the kingdom of God's sake, who shall not receive manifold more in this time, and in the world to come eternal life.' Denney says:

These words might almost stand for a description of Paul (and, we may say, of William Still). He had given up everything for Christ's sake. He had no home, no wife, no child; as far as we can see, no brother or friend among all his old acquaintances. Yet we may be sure that not one of those who were most richly blessed with all these natural relations and natural affections knew better than he what love is. No father ever loved his children more tenderly, fervently, austere and unchangeably than Paul loved those whom he had begotten in

into some soul God breathes a great breath of freedom and the drift is arrested

commentary on Isaiah, when interpreting the words of Is. 32:2, 'A man shall be a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place...', and relates something he often saw in his travels in the Middle East:

Where the desert touches a river-valley or oasis, the sand is in a continual state of drift from the wind, and it is this drift that is the real cause of the barrenness of the desert. But set down a rock on the sand, and see the difference its presence makes. After a few showers, to the leeward side of this some blades will spring up; if you have patience, you will see in time a garden. How has the boulder

the gospel. No father was ever rewarded with affection more genuine, obedience more loyal, than many of his converts rendered to him. Even in the trials of love, which search it, and strain it, and bring out its virtues to perfection—in misunderstandings, ingratitude, wilfulness, suspicion—he had an experience with blessings of its own in which he surpassed them all. If love is the true wealth and blessedness of our life, surely none was richer or more blessed than this man, who had given up for Christ's sake all those relations and connections through which love naturally comes. Christ had fulfilled to him the promise just quoted; he had given him a hundredfold in this life, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children. It would have been nothing but loss to cling to the natural affections and decline the lonely apostolic career.'

That was the kind of man William Still was. We shall not see his like again. Well might we honour him today, and give thanks to God upon every remembrance of him.

The Elder's Task

The Fourth Article on The Eldership

Eric J. Alexander

In this final article on the eldership, I want to concentrate on the ministry and function of the elder, focussing on the *nature* of the elder's task and then on the *manner* in which this task must be performed. To help us in this I want to think with you about a most significant passage, 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Practical reasons for the eldership

Let me first of all set these words in their context. These verses are linked with the previous section by the little word translated 'So' in the RSV, and strangely omitted altogether in the NIV.¹ Peter says, 'Therefore, to the elders among you I appeal....' It is a serious omission on the part of the NIV to leave out the word 'therefore' because it indicates to us that the apostle is writing his comments to

elders in the light of what he has just been saying. In 4:12, Peter has been warning his readers about the fiery trial or ordeal through which Christians may have to pass. 'Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you.'

God's provision for life's trials

He tells them how they are to come through this fiery trial and counsels them as to how they should face such trials. He goes on to conclude this exhortation in 4:19 by saying that 'those that suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator.'

Now the question at once arises, 'What will their faithful Creator do to sustain them in their trials?' One

aspect of the answer is provided at the beginning of chapter 5: their faithful Creator will provide shepherds to care for his flock and to pastor them through days of adversity.

Here, therefore, is the calling and the function of the under-shepherd. Christ the Chief Shepherd, who will one day give us the crown of glory, in the meantime has appointed us as under-shepherds to shepherd the flock of God through the trials and pains of life in this world. Can you see what an important part this plays in our understanding of the ministry of the elder? An essential element in God's care for his people in a fallen world is that he provides elders for the church. That then is the immediate biblical context out of which Peter speaks.

Weakness and inadequacy

But there is also in 5:1 a personal context: 'To the elders among you I appeal as a *fellow elder*, a *witness of the sufferings of Christ*.' Peter is writing both as an elder and an apostle. The implication is that he has already received that same commission from the Lord Jesus which he is now passing on to them. 'Feed (pastor) my sheep,' Christ had said to Peter by the lake side.² Surely Peter is providing great encouragement here, because the commission he is giving us is the commission he himself received when he was most conscious of his own failure, weakness and inadequacy. It was out of the ashes of his failure that God raised up Peter to a place of usefulness and service.

Alongside the high demands of the eldership, therefore, we must set this truth that God takes up the weak things of the world,³ delights to use earthen vessels, and places the glorious treasure of the Gospel in them.⁴ That is the implication of Peter's calling himself a 'fellow-elder.'

Caring for God's flock

Let us take this yet a stage further. His words, 'To the elders... I appeal as a fellow-elder,' are closely allied to the theme of oversight. 'Be shepherds of God's flock, serving as overseers.' And he develops further his commission: 'Tend the flock of God.'

Peter's language in describing the eldership is pastoral and it has a biblical foundation. God has a 'flock' which is his people and he is their shepherd.⁵ God has a two-fold means of expressing his care for his flock. First, he sends Christ as the Good Shepherd *to die* for them. Secondly, he appoints elders as the under-shepherds *to live* for them.

There are two emphases in what Peter has to say: the first is on the *nature* of the task – 'tend the flock' [RSV], and secondly on the *manner* in which the task is to be undertaken – 'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not because you must, but because you are willing... not greedy for money, but eager to serve....' So there are these two sides: the nature of the task and the manner in which the task is to be fulfilled.

The Nature of the Task

The word that Peter uses simply means to shepherd the flock of God. The NIV translates it that way. The AV has 'Feed the flock of God.' The RSV has 'Tend the flock.' He is of course giving the very same command which he himself received from the lips of Jesus. It was to be a ministry of general care for the sheep, perfectly portrayed for us in the ministry of him who is the Chief Shepherd as Peter calls him in v.4 of this passage.

Sacrifice

The Lord's ministry as the Good Shepherd and his perfect care for the flock provide the pattern for our own ministry as elders, a pattern expressed

in various ways. Jesus as the Chief Shepherd gives his life for the sheep in atoning grace.⁶ Although our giving of ourselves to the flock cannot be redemptive, it is none the less a giving of ourselves utterly to them with the same self-sacrifice which marked the giving of Jesus. Such self-giving is fundamental in the ministry of elders. They will be marked, Peter is about to say, by eagerness not reluctance, and they will serve not because they have to, but because they mirror the zeal⁷ with which the Lord Jesus gave himself utterly to the finishing of his Father's work.

Recall how when the disciples come back from Samaria where they had been buying the lunch, they said to Jesus, 'Master, eat,' and he replied: 'I have food to eat that you know nothing about.'⁸ These are some of the saddest words in all the Gospels as is seen in the disciples' reply, 'Has somebody given him something to eat? Where did he get his lunch from?' Jesus answers them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.'⁹ Contrary to our thinking that bread and butter is what we need in order to be strong enough to do work, Jesus says that doing the will of his Father is his sustenance, his life, and it is how he is nourished.

This selfless caring of the Lord Jesus has to be ours also. He gave himself. We too must give ourselves in sacrificial service. 'I run to do your will, O my God!'¹⁰ People ought to be able to look at us—not because we are self-consciously displaying an attitude, but because we cannot hide it—and see an absolute consecration to the will and purpose of God in every part of our life. And it should be a reflection of Jesus' self-giving.

Getting to know our people

You remember the Lord tells us that

he knows the sheep by name and they know his voice.¹¹ Learning to know people and getting inside their lives takes time—but we must, for this is the essence of true care. For some of us remembering people's names is a great problem. But it is essential, and you will know what it means to you when somebody remembers your name!

There are of course other major aspects of the Chief Shepherd's care for his sheep. They must be led to the pastures to be fed. And there are other sheep who as yet have no shepherd. Leading the sheep to be fed and searching for the sheep as yet outwith

'Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care... not because you must, but because you are willing'

the fold—these concerns of Christ should also be ours.

Overseers

'Be shepherds then,' says Peter, and adds, 'serving as overseers.' 'Overseers' carries the meaning of 'looking over', or 'keeping an eye on'. You know how people will say of their children when they are going away, 'Keep an eye on them for me.' What they are saying is, 'Look after them. You do for them what I would do for them if I were here.'

That is what God is saying to us concerning the flock: 'You keep an eye on them the way I would have done.' Because 'the eyes of the Lord run to and fro over the whole earth'¹² on behalf of his people. He has his eye upon us

constantly. The oversight, you see, is not an official, but a pastoral care.

The Nature of the Ministry

Notice next *the manner* in which this task of shepherding is to be undertaken.

Not in the wrong spirit

'Not by constraint,' says the RSV (5:2). The NIV has 'not because you must'. Not with a grudging spirit which constantly needs to be prodded but 'because you are willing'. The NIV adds 'as God wants you to be'. The RV has, 'according to God'. Peter is saying that God has given freely and

the whole basis of the eldership is that we should eschew all self-seeking so that our goal will be the glory of God and the well-being of his people.

willingly to us, so our service to him needs to be with the same absence of compulsion and the same willing freedom of spirit and enthusiasm to serve God and his people.

Let me illustrate this. One morning I spoke separately to two men both involved in ministry of some kind. The first one who came to see me told me the whole of his story. I knew something of his situation and it is true there were difficulties; but his great cry was that in his difficulties he was not being appreciated. It can be a grave problem when one is not being appreciated. Because people were not appreciating him he was in the doldrums and in great distress. When he left me, I felt a tremendous cloud over my soul coming from the attitude

of this man to his ministry. Certainly he had problems but there was no awareness of the sheer privilege and joy there is in serving God.

Less than an hour later somebody else came to see me who was also involved in serving God in a situation which frankly would have made me wither if I thought that I was going to be in it. His sphere of ministry was full of problems, all kinds of incredible difficulties. Into the bargain, he was deprived of nearly everything that most other people had. He sat down and said, 'I'm just here to share some of these things with you and talk them over to see if we can come to some kind of conclusion about how I should respond. But,' he said, 'I want to say to you first of all, over and above anything else I say, I am overwhelmed at the goodness of God in giving me the privilege of serving such a Master.'

There was an immense lesson for me in that. Being under-shepherds entrusted by God with the care of his flock is a privilege that surpasses any other in the whole world. It would be demotion to be Prime Minister of this country or President of the United States compared to this! And you and I need to grasp that there is something altogether glorious about our calling. I sometimes say to some of my fellow-ministers that there are occasions when I have been in my study preparing to minister the word and I have got up from my desk and walked around the study floor saying to myself, 'How amazing it is to be paid to do this!' I do believe we need that sense of the enormous privilege there is in serving the living God—however difficult our sphere of ministry.

Not for the wrong motives

Secondly, not for the wrong motives. 'Be shepherds of God's flock... not greedy for money, but eager to serve'.

The NIV is here translating it specifically in terms of financial gain. But that may be to narrow it down too much. Peter's meaning no doubt includes the idea of financial gain and clearly such a base and despicable motive to use the service of God for such an end would be to prostitute it.

However I think we must widen the meaning to include all forms of self-seeking, self-interest and self-advancement in the service of God. It is possible to abuse the service of God in such a way that we are really seeking glory for ourselves rather than his glory. By contrast, the whole basis of the eldership is that we should eschew all self-seeking so that our goal will be the glory of God and the well-being of his people.

Such aims will save us from certain kinds of discouragement, because if our concern is that we be appreciated or that we get self-fulfilment out of what we are doing then we will be bound to find ourselves submerged in despair. Whereas if the glory and honour of God and the well-being of his people become by his grace the dominant motivation in our lives then that will save us from discouragement.

Not in the wrong way

Thirdly, not in the wrong way. 'Not lording it over those entrusted to you' (5:3). 'Not domineering' is one translation. While the apostle's thought may be closely allied with the spirit in which we serve, he is dealing with the specific temptation to be domineering, overbearing, and in some cases harsh and uncaring.

Paul describes the opposite attitude for us in 2 Timothy 2:24: 'The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading

them to a knowledge of the truth'. The servant of the Lord must be gentle. That is, the manner in which we are to have the oversight over God's flock must never be one of over-bearing superiority but of humble gentleness. Peter's opposite is, of course, 'being examples to the flock.' It is *what I am* in the service of God that really matters.

Younger people and others within the church of God who have their hearts set on growing up into Christ should be able to look at those of us who are elders and say, 'That's the kind of person I want God to make me.' That is what an example is. When the salesman shows you samples he says, 'This is what you will be getting if you buy my product.' Likewise, we should be God's samples of what Christian men and women will one day become.

Submission to the elders

'Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older' (5:5). I would suggest that here Peter is speaking about the response to the eldership in the congregation: those the elders are serving should gladly submit to those who are over them in the Lord. The way grace will be seen in a congregation and pride will be absent will be the way people respond to leadership. Compare how in Hebrews 13:17 the writer urges his readers: 'Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.'

Such submission puts an end to a great deal of the murmuring that goes on in many congregations through little, irritated groups which gather to try to get their own way in certain things. The biblical pattern is the congregation is to submit to those chosen by God to rule. If the elders

are not fulfilling their task well, those in the congregation must pray for them that they may be changed. In the meantime they need to submit, and it is important for us to see that, not as a suggestion, but as a biblical command.

Church membership

Incidentally, this is one of the areas from which I press upon people the necessity of church membership. There are some who say, 'I don't need to be a member of any church. I can just attend and be part of the worship without needing to be a member of a church. I don't see church membership in Scripture.' I always say to such people, 'The Scripture says you must submit to those who have the rule over you. Here is a command which it is impossible for you to obey if you are not a member.' When we become members of a church we put ourselves under the government of the elders in that church.

The crown of glory

In conclusion, notice that Peter puts this whole issue in the same context as we have just seen in Hebrews 13:17. 'When the Chief Shepherd appears,' he says, 'you will receive the crown of glory'. In the light of our thinking about 'caretakers' – and that is what we are – all of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel parable about stewards¹³ implies the master is going to return and require an account of those who were appointed stewards during his absence. The caretaker or steward has to give an account to the head of the firm who returns from his business trip abroad and asks, 'I left you in charge while I was away. How have you discharged the stewardship I put in your hands?' 'Have your elders been exercising the ministry of the caretaker?' says the writer of Hebrews. 'Obey them and submit to their

authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.'

The reason we need to give ourselves to a biblical view and practice of the eldership is that the Chief Shepherd is going to return in glory one day and he is going to sift through our service. As Paul tells us, God is going to be concerned with how we have been building. Have I been building gold, silver, precious stones, the costly and permanent materials? Or have I been building wood, hay and stubble, the cheap and temporary materials?¹⁴ The day will declare it, says Paul, for the Chief Shepherd will appear and we want, do we not, to receive the crown

When we become members of a church we put ourselves under the government of the elders in that church.

of glory from him, and to know that he will say to us, 'Well done, you have been faithful over a few things, enter into the joy of your reward.'¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 The same word is translated *therefore* in Rom. 12:1.
- 2 John 21:15ff.
- 3 1 Cor. 1:26ff.
- 4 2 Cor. 4:7.
- 5 Cf. Is. 40:11 etc.
- 6 Jn. 10:11,15,18.
- 7 Jn. 2:17.
- 8 Jn. 4:32.
- 9 Jn. 4:33f.
- 10 Ps. 40:8; cf. Jn. 5:19,30; 6:38ff., etc.
- 11 Jn. 10:4,14ff.
- 12 Zech. 1:11; 4:10,; cf. Prov. 15:3.
- 13 Mt. 25:14ff.; cf. Lk. 19:11ff.
- 14 1 Cor. 3:12-15.
- 15 Mt. 25:21,23.

Train the Child

The First in a series of articles taken from a book originally written in 1956 by Annie Torrance

Few moments of more unspeakable joy can come to anyone during a lifetime than that moment when a new born babe is laid in a mother's arms for the first time! The days of patient waiting, of fortitude, sometimes with much weariness, with its climax of pain and fear are soon forgotten in that wonderful moment! Hope at last has given place to possession.

How the horizon has changed for both parents! With the birth of a first child there seems to be a kind of rebirth of the parents. Certainly there is a sense of maturity—of having arrived; and a new feeling of responsibility, not known before. Here is a helpless, clinging baby utterly dependent on the love and care of his or her parents. New determinations, new emotions and hopes crowd into the heart and mind. What belonged to the past now seems trivial and sinks away into the background. Life has become bigger and a much more important place to live in. There is a new objective and something to aspire to. The cry of the baby, the touch of its hand, the gentle gaze from its sleepy eyes are like new wine to the parents and life seems to have acquired wings!

The two-fold gift

Yet is this all? Surely behind all the

natural joy and deep down in the heart are there not questions that come to the surface? To Christian parents there must be. What kind of man or woman will this small baby become one day? Here is not only a new born baby, but a living soul, an eternal creation. Here is something far more profound, and of far greater consequence than appears to the eye. Wrapped up in this little bundle of life are the beginnings of all that will one day reach maturity, whether for good or ill: characteristics, emotions, prejudices, the power to choose or reject, to scorn or to love, the beginning of those things that make life harder or easier for others to live in the world.

The main thing for those of us who believe and hope for eternal life with Christ our Lord is that we reflect upon the fact that there is a spiritual meaning and definite purpose of God in this little child as well as a destiny which we must keep in mind. God has given a twofold gift, a human life to love and cherish, and a living soul to teach, train and bring to the Great Shepherd, out of whose hand none shall pluck them.

Acknowledging God

Our temptation is to forget and lose sight of the main issues. We are carried

away and absorbed with things seen. Even the best of Christian parents become so taken up with the common necessities that sometimes God just isn't counted in with the care of the child as he should be. The child is a joy and meant to be, and the days are fully occupied with things necessary for the child. We delight in every new sign of development and intelligence, while the demands for the well-being of the child absorb our time and thought.

However, sometimes our joy may become a concern and worry as we get into difficulties. At such times God would remind us that when he gives his gifts, he gives himself with them. God is always so different from us. His ways are so much higher than ours. When we give gifts to one another, we are apt to spoil them by being conscious of ourselves, and thrust ourselves before our gifts, allowing our motives to be mixed up even though we may not be conscious of it ourselves. Unlike this, God seems to hide himself in the shadow, for he covets our love and our hearts, not for what he gives but for what he is and desires.

The care of the young infant is certainly something we can do for God. Some parents appear to regard their baby as a kind of toy and novelty; others take the birth of the child as

Mrs Annie Torrance, mother of the Very Revd Prof. T.F. Torrance, the Revd Prof. James Torrance, and the Revd David Torrance, must have been a most remarkable woman. Wife of a CIM missionary, she stayed in Scotland to bring up her three sons and three daughters while her husband returned to China to complete the work he and his wife had earlier begun—surely an immense sacrifice for both parents. The success of Annie Torrance’s method of training her children may be seen in the remarkable record now evident into the third generation of the wider Torrance family which continues to enrich the Church with outstanding service. We are immensely grateful to Prof. T. F. Torrance and the family for permission to publish a series of extracts from the book their mother wrote.

an ordinary affair of life and one of those things we have to have and accept. To appropriate some words from the Holy Scriptures, ‘Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will give you wages.’

It is for our comfort and peace that we acknowledge God’s goodness to us, and accept what he has committed to our charge, as from himself. Then no matter what may lie ahead, we shall at all times be able to turn to him who is the Source of all knowledge and understanding. The baby’s needs will increase each day and our need of wisdom and strength will also increase, as our responsibility becomes more manifest to ourselves. We all feel our insufficiency, and God means it so that we may the more readily cast ourselves on him.

The divine desire

The novelty of our baby will wear away but the reality will remain, and joy in the possession of our little one will be intensified if we have the conscious companionship of the Lord every step of the way. God will allow us to feel our need of him in times of sickness, anxiety, distress and trial, from which none of us can escape. As parents we need him more than ever. The little child needs him too, though so small,

and it is through the parent that the babe’s need must be met. So much that will necessarily follow later, depends on this right attitude at the start with God, if we are in earnest about our child’s spiritual welfare and salvation.

Not only does God need men and women, but boys and girls, according to his Word. He needs them; he wants them. Little children find it so much easier than many adults to come to him. It is quite natural with them. They turn to him as the flower turns to the sun. They are his precious jewels, and no doubt feel the drawing power of the Sun of Righteousness. But God expects us to bring them to him.

The new born babe is another life for him to live in, feet for him to walk in, hands for him to use, a voice for him to speak through, a heart for him to love through. The baby is God’s opportunity in the completion of his work. Our part is to see that he comes into the possession of his own, and that we never attempt to go it alone, but always as workers together with him. ‘Apart from me you can do nothing.’ What shall we render unto the Lord for his unspeakable gift in Christ Jesus, who came into this world as a helpless babe? Is there a better way

than to determine, as far as in us lies, that we train our little one for him so that he can say to each of our children, ‘They shall be mine, in the day when I make up my jewels’?

Public acknowledgement

St Paul reminds us that it is from the Jews that we have received the living oracles of God, the Testaments, the Prophets, the Gospel and the written Word of God. Among all this we have the teaching of the way they prayed and ordered their children, even the infants. From the earliest days of the Covenant God made with Israel we find that the children were always made partakers with their parents in God’s promises and blessings: ‘To you and to your children....’ When they were called to appear before the Lord on special occasions they came with the women and children they had in the Covenant. In this age we are apt to leave children out of the spiritual inheritance which is surely theirs by right from God. In the New Testament we read that Mary, the mother of the Lord, lost no time in bringing her Child up to Jerusalem, ‘to present him to the Lord’.

Hebrew mothers used to take their children to the Temple, not only to give thanks for God’s gift and

goodness to them, but also to present their children to the Lord and ask his blessing as they offered their sacrifice in witness to his forgiveness, redemption and salvation. Ought not we also to enter into the same spirit by bringing our children publicly to the Lord, and acknowledging the holy sacrifice of the Lamb of God, who died for all, even for the little children?

Our Lord always insisted on public acknowledgment. The leper was to go to the Temple to show himself to the priest. The possessed man was to return and tell what great things God had done for him. The woman who touched his garment had to

proceeds from the heart' makes or mars a person.

This also affects our children. What we really are will tell on them more quickly than anything else. As we minister to them the necessary things of life, we will, however unconsciously, impress ourselves upon them. Above all, it is the spiritual life within that will certainly communicate itself to the child.

It is certainly through the outward expressions of feeling that the personality of the child will be formed. We have to keep in mind that the baby has not just burst in on our lives for our own enjoyment! Our Lord spoke of the joy of the mother when she receives her child, and of how her travail and pain are soon forgotten in her new-found joy. It is surely the compensation of love and our joy will be more lasting and will increase as we share it with our Lord. To mingle all we do for the child in a practical way with the spiritual will bring about the result we long for. The impression made on the little brain will find a way to the heart.

The language of love

The inward growth begins as soon as the outward; unseen, it goes on and much will depend on the environment as to the form it will take. The love and gentleness of the parental care lavished on the child will soon show its results. Peace and contentment will shape the expression. A babe hungers by nature for love as much as for food. Love is a language it can understand. A rough, impatient hand, a nasty spirit, a harsh voice and bad temper will also have its effect on the child. It will become uneasy, restless and fretful, and naturally this has its reaction on its spiritual nature.

As the mother is, so the child will

be. That is her prerogative in the very early years. She has to feed and wash the child, and the mother quite naturally fills the child's horizon. An affinity will continually grow between them, defying words to explain. The child will watch its mother's face and be quick to detect and feel any disturbance there. It will respond to her every mood, and be concerned at every indifference and forgetfulness. A mother, calm and placid, relaxed and contented in mind, will reproduce those qualities in her infant. It is not always easy to realise that our spiritual restfulness and assurance are doing the same for the child. As the Lord makes his face to shine into the heart of the mother, so it will be reflected as in a mirror in the face of the child.

Security and balance

An even tenor of life gives a child a sense of security and confidence without which it will be unhappy. Security is the desire of all human nature. Even the little dumb creatures seek it. The baby is no exception. A child is quick to sense when security is there and when it is not. The mother is the key to that in the earlier years, and later on, the father.

One can observe many implications of this. An infant when not very well in its parent's arms will sometimes put out its hand to draw the parent's face towards itself, asking for the comforting love it knows to be there, a touching sight which speaks for itself. With understanding as well as love the child will maintain strength, physically, mentally, and spiritually. Seeking to maintain an allround balance for the well-being of the child will simply repay any sacrifice that has to be made. It will go far to guarantee a healthy body and mind and make spiritual things natural.

God has given a twofold gift, a human life to love and cherish, and a living soul to teach, train and bring to the Great Shepherd

acknowledge her need and her healing. In presenting our children to him publicly we claim his promises for them and proclaim our belief in his Word.

Intermingling of spiritual and material

Perhaps due to the kind of life we are forced to live and the heavy demands on our time, we fall into the temptation to separate spiritual from material things in our daily living. We keep them in separate compartments. What we say and do continually are outward signs of what we are within. Our characters are formed and expressed by the things we think and frame in our minds. As our Lord said, 'That which

One is reminded of an orchestral piece of music. Throughout the rendering there is the constant, persistent theme, sometimes soft, sometimes louder, but always underlying or penetrating the various instruments until as the music reaches its climax the theme is united with all the volume of music as it bursts into a perfect harmony and unison of triumph. So the undertone of spiritual possibility is always there waiting to be caught up into the physical and mental, the outward and inward, things that make up life in its fullness.

It is this persistent, insistent appeal of the soul's need for its realisation which should not be neglected; without it the heart is unsatisfied and life is meaningless, if not chaotic. Human beings old and young are only at rest in heart when they know that they are right with God and partakers of spiritual life with him; when all that alienates them from him has been taken away, and they are in tune with the Infinite. God has made us for himself and only when we know we have a place in his heart through Jesus Christ, and life is in harmony with him, can we have courage, hope and peace to face life. In a miniature way this is also reflected in the life and soul even of a child.

The earliest of beginnings

It is this atmosphere of spiritual awareness from the beginning that will bring God and his way of salvation into the life of a child in a simple and natural way. Too often it is deferred until the mind and outlook of a child have largely been formed without God, and the effort to bring them to the Lord is harder, because the spiritual sensitivity has been neglected rather than encouraged. The result of neglecting this spiritual aptitude,

which God gives to all when they come into the world, is as it would be with any other faculty, indifference, if not impotency.

Little children are quite natural and easy to lead if we are natural too in the things of God, and take them for granted as much as the daily routine. To be truly spiritually minded, as St Paul enjoins, creates around us a God-consciousness which will have its effect on the child.

Means of grace

The good habits of daily prayer, reading the Bible and meditating on the Word of God will equip us for this most precious task. Often life seems too demanding, and we are cast down and get physically tired, and the temptation comes to let things go. We give way to self-pity perhaps and the spiritual temperature around us drops to freezing point with the resultant effect on all in our home, including the infant.

At such times it is helpful to examine our daily life and see how much time we waste on things that are unnecessary. A little re-arrangement of duties may be needed, with some self-discipline and self-denial in things which, though quite legitimate and socially attractive, are better forgone for a while that we may conserve strength and time for relaxation for the sake of the baby and the home.

The prior claim

It is not infrequent that a Christian mother becomes involved in too many outside activities which take her away from the home and the child too much. But it should be remembered that the infant really has the prior claim on the mother's time in the early years. More time given to the Word of God and letting the Holy Spirit

apply it to the need of the heart, are a wonderful tonic. We are quickened by the Word of God, and if we will, we shall find it satisfies beyond all else.

Many people complain of children difficult in their later years. Perhaps much of this could have been avoided if there had been more time spent and more perseverance in creating a happy spiritual awareness in the home, which would have imprinted itself indelibly on the heart of the child and wound those cords of love around it which none can tear from the memory. Like everything else, if we sow abundantly we shall reap abundantly.

*a mother, calm and placid,
relaxed and contented in
mind, will reproduce those
qualities in her infant*

Conclusion

It is in our power to create a restful, happy atmosphere for our children which will be a lasting background. We can foster a quiet and natural God-consciousness in our home and an 'at-homeness' with the Lord in which not only quite small children will come to know him and are easily brought to him, but an access is opened to him that will stand in time of need throughout life. Let us make sure we are among those of whom it was said 'They brought unto him also infants', and let us keep on bringing them until they know the way to come themselves.

The Undecaying Power and Grace of God

A Sermon by Thomas Guthrie,
Minister of Free St. John's, Edinburgh, 1843-1864

*'Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save;
neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.' Is. 59:1.*

The face of nature never seems to change. The strongest arm grows old and feeble; raven locks turn gray; wrinkles deform the finest face; the once graceful form bends tottering to the grave; and the mind itself not infrequently seems to partake in the general decay. But the years which work such change on us roll over our world, like successive waves over a rock, leaving no trace behind. Each returning spring is welcomed with songs; every summer decks our meadows and gardens with the old flowers; and, as if her powers

could suffer no decay, in crops of fruit and in fields of golden corn autumn year by year renews the bounties of Nature.

We revisit our birth-place after an absence, say of fifty years. With the exception of a few in whose wrinkled and withered faces we begin to recognise some features of our old, noisy, rosy, laughing companions, we find most of our friends dead and gone. There are new faces in the school, a new tenant in every farm, a new peasant in every cottage, a new minister in every pulpit, and a new congregation

in the pews so that we might almost doubt whether we had been there before. But when we turn to look on nature, we might fancy that we had never left home, and that the last fifty years were nothing but a dream. The sun rises over the same hill, the moonbeams glitter on the same loch, the skies resound with the same songs, moorland and mountain are clad in the same flowery verdure, and the gray rocks look down as of old on the burn winding its way through the glen, here brawling over the same stones, and there sweeping into the same swirling

pool.

So is it everywhere with nature! The Pharaohs sleep in their stony sepulchres, and Moses in his lone mountain grave, but the Nile rolls on as in the day when the Hebrew mother committed her child to its waters, and to the providence of her God. Capernaum, Chorazin, Bethsaida! places that the Saviour once knew are no more; but the mountains of Galilee stand around her lake as they presented themselves to Jesus' eye.

Yet, fixed as nature seems to be, on examining the matter more closely, we find there is nothing fixed: and that it is not her prerogative to say, 'I change not.' The snows of winter and the rains of summer are constantly altering the form and features of this great world; and by means of their ten thousand streams are carrying it off to its grave in the depths of ocean. Change not! It is by constant, perpetual change that nature maintains that appearance of sameness which strikes us as so remarkable—just, to use a plain but expressive illustration, as it is by constant revolutions a spinning top keeps itself from falling.

Imagine the fortunes of an atom of matter. Loosed from the rock by the hand of the frost, swept by a mountain stream into the valley, and left by a flood on the bank, it enters into a blade of grass. The grass withers and dies, and feeding the heather by its decay, our atom next blooms in its purple bell. Cropped by the moor-cock, it is next whirring along the hill-side, when the eagle, stooping from the clouds, strikes down his prey, and our atom now rises

in wings which cleave the sky. Death at length lays low this monarch of the air: falling from his cloudy realm, he dies; and, rotting on the soil, feeds the pastures where a lamb crops the flower into which our atom has passed. In time the lamb falls to the knife, and now, becoming the food of man, it enters into the hand that wields a sceptre; or curls in the tresses that lend grace to beauty; or speaks in the tongue that in the senate-house sways the councils of a nation, or from the pulpit invites sinners to the arms of the Saviour, and addresses the unchangeable Jehovah: 'Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thine hands: they shall perish; but thou remainest....'

Among all beings animate and inanimate, of earth or heaven, there is but one in the universe fixed, immovable, unchangeable. He alone can say, 'I am the Lord, I change not.' Therefore, speaking of him, the prophet says, 'Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.'

1. Those to whom these words were first addressed

I admit that the fortunes of that people do not at first sight appear to correspond with this very confident and comforting declaration. For where is Jerusalem? Where now is she that was once called 'the joy of the whole earth,' 'the city of our God'? Insulting

their captives, and persecuting instead of pitying those whom God had smitten, the Babylonians bade the Hebrews take their harps from the willows, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'

It is base to hit a man when he is down; but were I to insult a Jew, the Bible would furnish me with keener sarcasm than the Babylonians'.

'Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the work of thine hands: they shall perish; but thou remainest'

Jerusalem's towers and palaces and temple have been devoured by fire; the very foundations of the city were turned up by the Roman's ploughshare; and the site of her holy sanctuary is now profaned by a mosque. She retains no vestige of her former glory apart from some old colossal stones, beside which Jews may be found weeping—kissing them with the affection that regards her very dust as dear.

How taunting, insulting were it simply to repeat in their ears the words of that old, proud, patriotic psalm, 'Walk about Zion, and go round about her; tell the towers thereof. Mark ye well her bulwarks, consider her palaces, that ye may tell it to the generation following.' Yet on the day when the Roman legions beset her walls, the

Lord's hand was not shortened, that it could not save; neither his ear heavy, that it could not hear. He heard the din of battle, he heard the roar of fire; and it was not because he could not, that he did not save.

Where are the chosen people? A nation scattered! Into what countries have they not been scattered, and what country has not scattered and peeled them in return as fugitives for eighteen hundred years? For this they have to thank their fathers. His blood, they cried, be on us, and on our children; blood this, the only blood, whose stain years never have effaced; nor will, till the time to favour Zion, the set time is

*like the grass which grows
thickest when trodden on,
they have thriven under
oppression*

come, when God will bring back his banished ones, and make good the promise to them.

Strange fortunes these! Yet far from proving God's hand to be shortened, they prove the very reverse. The Jews have been oppressed, persecuted, trodden under foot; and, like the grass which grows thickest when trodden on, they have thriven under oppression—bearing a charmed life—the true sons of their fathers in the land of Egypt; of whom it was said, the more they were afflicted, the more they multiplied and grew.

The Jews are everywhere—inhabiting every country, yet belonging to none; mixed with every people, but combining with none. By the thrones

of kings, in the senate-house of nations, in the mart of business, in the ranks of armies, everywhere the same, the Jew preserves his nationality; his faith; his pride, his blood so pure that, whether you encounter him in the streets of London, or Paris, or Rome, or Petersburg, or Peking, you can tell at once by his features that he is a son of Abraham.

They exist among others as no other race ever did, like oil in water; and like oil, too, where their talents and ambition have free play, they usually rise to the top. Living, multiplying, flourishing amid circumstances that, by all the common laws of providence, should have been fatal to their existence, they illustrate my text—proving the unchanging and unchangeable power of God as plainly as Daniel safe among hungry lions, or the bush that burned and was not consumed.

II. Consider the truths expressed by these words

God's power to save neither lost nor lessened

What father and mother would not wish all their children to be saved, and that all should meet, none missing, before the throne in glory? What pastor, worthy of a pulpit, does not wish all his people to be saved—every member of his flock gathered at last into the Good Shepherd's fold? Yet our power to save is not boundless. Limited, it often falls far short of our inclinations.

So it was with that unhappy man whom the sinking wreck left in the roaring sea—with a child clinging to one arm and his wife to the other. With his right hand free to buffet the billows,

he might have borne one to shore, but not both. Encumbered, his strength failing, to save both is impossible; now he must choose which to save. Dreadful alternative! He shakes off the child, and striking for the land, away from its dying cries, he leaves the little one that had clung to him to perish.

It was for no such reason that Jesus bore to heaven one only of the thieves crucified by his side. True, only one was taken while the other was left; true, the wind bloweth where it listeth, and so is every one that is born of the Spirit. But that wretched man who perished beside Christ's cross, sinking into hell while he saw his fellow go soaring to heaven, was not lost because Christ's hand was shortened that it could not save. He was not, like that unhappy child, shaken off, though clinging to the Saviour and crying, Lord, save me, I perish. No, his loss finds its explanation in these sad, solemn, awful words, 'You will not come to me, that ye might have life.' Those only are excluded from heaven who exclude themselves.

Again, our power to help may be lessened and impaired by years. Consider David's history. He began and closed his battles by personal encounter with the giant sons of Anak. But how great a change had the forty years of cares that elapsed between these two battles, wrought on him. Lithe of limb and fleet of foot, quick of eye and sure of aim, he had run to meet the boastful Goliath. At the last of his conflicts the old courage is there and the fire of youth blazes from the ashes of age, but the strength is gone. Gray locks fall from beneath his helmet; his eye, dim with years, has lost its eagle glance as he closes with this other Philistine. They meet and when sword strikes fire with sword, before the shower of blows that ring from the giant's arm on his casque,

David is driven back; unless Abishai had thrown himself before his king, one of Goliath's race had avenged Goliath's death. David's hand was shortened; and the men of Israel, as they bore off their aged king and received on their shields the blows aimed at his old, gray head said, 'You shall go no more out with us to battle, so you do not quench the light of Israel.'

The time comes when the actor must leave the public stage, when the reins drop from the leader's grasp, and the orator's tongue falters, and the workman's stout arm grows feeble, and the fire of wit is quenched, and the man of genius turns into a drivelling idiot, and men of understanding pass into a second childhood. But the time shall never come when it can be said of Jesus, his hand is shortened, that it cannot save. No. 'The same yesterday, and today, and for ever.' There is nothing he ever did, in saving, blessing, sanctifying, that he cannot do again.

This gives undying value to all the offers, invitations, and promises of the gospel. What he has done in other cases he can do in yours, closing wounds deep as Job's; healing backslidings bad as David's; receiving penitents vile as she who bathed his feet with tears; and saving sinners near to hell as he who found salvation on the very brink of death. I promise you the same pardon, grace, and mercy as that of which there is any record in the word of God. Christ's resources are inexhaustible.

Here, one man's gain is no other man's loss. People fight for a place in the life-boat, because its accommodation is limited, but Christ has room for all. He is able to save to the uttermost. We cannot be too great sinners to be saved; and my answer to any who, yielding to despair, say, 'It is impossible that we can be changed,' is this, 'It is not impossible that you, but it is impossible that he,

can be changed. He cannot change or lie who said, "Whoever cometh to me I will in no wise cast out."

God's power to hear and answer prayer neither lost nor lessened

On one occasion a party of our soldiers happened to enter a cottage that stood on ground which had been occupied by an enemy whom they were driving before them. An infant's cries attracted their attention, and they turned to look on a spectacle which woke their pity. A father's corpse lay where he had fallen, fighting to protect those within. Amid a pool of blood lay the dead mother; on her bosom an infant, unconscious of its loss, cried as it sought to draw nourishment from her empty breast. Time was when its cry roused her from sleep; but now it cried, and she lay unmoved—her ear heavy, that it could not hear. Unless those men, touched with pity, had wrapped up the babe tenderly, and borne it away through the smoke and noise of battle to be cared for, it had perished in a mother's arms, for her hand was shortened and could not save. So perish none in Christ!

This imparts undying value to all those instances of heard, accepted, answered, prayer of which the Bible is so full. There are answers common and miraculous to prayers in all variety of imaginable circumstances—prayers by saints and sinners. Prayers offered with life's last breath and by childhood's lisping tongue; in royal palaces, and in loathsome dungeons; in a den of lions, and in the depths of ocean; for health in sickness, and for bread in famine; for patience under trials, and deliverance in hopeless circumstances; for pardon and mercy to the greatest sinners.

Never was the Lord's hand shortened, that it could not save, nor

his ear heavy, that it could not hear. Why, then, should you despair? Did he save the thief when his own hands were nailed to the accursed tree? When dying himself, amid the agonies of the cross, with all God's billows and waves roaring over his own head, did he hear and heed the cry of that poor wretch sinking at his side?

And now, exalted to the right hand of God, seated on his Father's throne, with all power in earth and heaven, how confident may we be that he will hear the prayer of the destitute, and save them who are ready to perish! Hear the cloud of witnesses now in his presence: If we found mercy to pardon

This imparts undying value to all those instances of heard, accepted, answered, prayer of which the Bible is so full.

and grace to help us, if we washed away our sins in the fountain of Jesus' blood, if we were brought up from deep pit and miry clay, to sit on thrones and wear blood-bought crowns, why not you? Behold, the Lord's ear is not heavy that it cannot hear.

Comfort and encouragement

One wonders in reading the early history of the Israelites how, after what they had seen of God's power, they could ever doubt or distrust it. We think: Had we stood beside Moses on the banks of the Nile, and seen her waters at a wave of his rod change to blood; or had we seen the gates of the sea thrown back and held open, till, walking between two walls of water, we

reached the other strand; or had we pitched our tent where the skies dropped not dews, nor hoar-frost, but food on the wilderness, and made barren sands more fertile than fields of corn; recollecting how the waters had been turned into rock, we would have waited to see the rock turned into water, and not joined the unbelieving crew in their cries to Moses, 'Wherefore hast thou brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?'

For God's people today

So we judge. But may we not think more lightly of ourselves than we ought

And if God has graciously delivered you from the curse, shall he not deliver you from the power of sin?

to think? For as the bravest troops have sometimes been seized with panic, or as where an epidemic rages, killing thousands, the stout and healthy who survive may yet suffer some touch of the disease, even Moses himself on one occasion gave way to despondency—in reply to God's promise to give them flesh, asking, 'The people are six hundred thousand footmen; shall the flocks and the herds be slain for them, to suffice them?'

'Is the Lord's hand waxed short?' was God's answer to Moses. And it is mine to all the believer's doubts, difficulties and fears. Since you were called, converted, first visited with saving grace, is the Lord's hand waxed short? No; then let that thought inspire you, as it did David, with dauntless faith.

As with a touch of pity Saul looked on the stripling who offered to do battle with the Philistine, he said, 'Thou art not able to go against this Philistine: for thou art but a youth, and he a man of war from his youth.' 'The Lord that hath delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine', was the bold reply.

Sound logic, as well as sound theology! And if God has graciously delivered you from the curse, shall he not deliver you from the power of sin? If he has justified, shall he not also sanctify you? If he has brought you out of Egypt, shall he not guide your steps to Canaan? He did not pluck you from the burning to throw you again into the fire. Cast your burden on the Lord, and he will sustain you. Pray, and wait the answer. As Moses said to Israel, with the Red Sea obstructing their flight: Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord. His hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.

Hope and encouragement to sinners

In the annual Reports of hospitals we read of the number sent away cured, the number remaining under cure, and of the number who have been dismissed as incurable—their cases baffling the skill and power of medicine. The Great Physician knows no such class; the gospel brings glad tidings to the chief of sinners. This is a faithful saying, says St Paul, Christ Jesus is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him.

People sometimes say of the dying, they were too late in calling the doctor. With the cold sweat standing like beads on the brow, the features pinched, the eye glazed, the death-rattle sounding in the throat, the skill of man is hopeless. He cures disease, not death. Alas! 'tis

true; too late, too late! It is never so for Christ. David had one in his flock that he had plucked out of the lion's very jaws; but Christ has many such—many saved who were as near destruction.

Tell me not, then, that you have sinned too much or too long to be saved. Is his hand shortened since the day he saved the dying thief, and set his soul free to go up to heaven, like a bird out of the fowler's snare? Look what he has done for others, and learn what he can and will do for you. Too great sinners to be saved? Hast thou with Peter looked Jesus in the face, and cursing, said, 'I know him not'? Hast thou with the thief joined thy fellows in reviling a dying Lord? Hast thou stood on Calvary to shake the head and point the finger and cry, in mockery of him whom the nails fastened to the cross, If thou be the Son of God, come down! No? Then why should the door be shut against you that opened to these?

Who gets to heaven will find seated on its thrones greater saints than he has been, and on others greater sinners. God has done more marvellous works of power and mercy than saving you. Though he had not, though you were the vilest sinner that ever polluted his beautiful earth with your feet, or profaned his holy sanctuary with your presence, you have only now, and as you are, to throw yourself at the feet of Jesus, crying, Save me, I perish—and you are saved.

*Out of your last home dark and cold,
Thou shalt pass to a city whose streets
are gold;*

*From the silence that falls upon sin
and pain,*

*To the deathless joys of the angels'
strain;*

*Well shall be ended what ill began,
Out of the shadow into the sun.*

In Honour of the Father

The First Article in a series of three on the Trinity

Eugene Peterson

We find ourselves in an incredibly beautiful country, various and exquisite. Breathtaking beauty. Heartstopping wonders. We lift our eyes to the hills and see God: praise and gratitude spring spontaneously from our lips—thanks!

But this beautiful country is also a dangerous country. There are crazy people out there with guns; there are storms and drunken drivers; lightning strikes at random; wasps crash our picnics. We fasten our seatbelts, train our children not to speak to strangers, and apply insect repellent. Not infrequently we cry out, 'Help!'

This beautiful and dangerous country is also, in some mysterious yet inescapable way, my country, our country. We are not tourists here; we are not spectators taking photographs of the cliffs and meadows, the cottages and the people; we don't have the leisure to write excited letters to our friends

about the beauties we admire and the dangers we fear. We are part of it: we don't just look and admire, or look and fear—we *respond*. It's hardly a decision; we can't help it: everything out there touches something in here, in me, in you, in us. 'I respond therefore I am.'

I'm talking about the country of the Trinity. In these three articles, we will be meeting and worshipping, conversing and listening, obeying and deciding, eating and sleeping in Honour of the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. Our intent is to explore this country in which we know and believe in and serve God. My part in this is to focus our attention on the persons and work of the Trinity – the Father and the work of creation, the Son and the work of salvation, and the Spirit and the work of holy living.

A map of the Trinity

Trinity maps the country in which we know and receive and obey God. It is

not the country itself, but a map of the country. And a most useful map it is, for God is vast and various, working visibly and invisibly. Left to ourselves we often get lost in blind alleys and tangled up in thickets and don't have a clue to where we are. The map locates us: it provides the vocabulary and identifies the experience by which we can explore God when there are no signs pointing to him, when there are no neatly lettered labels defining the odd shape or feeling that is in front of our eyes.

There is this also to be said about a map. Even though there is something artificial about a map, it is not imposed on the land. It comes out of careful observation and accurate recording of what is actually there. It is required that maps be honest. There is also this: maps are humble—they don't pretend to substitute for the country itself. Studying the map doesn't provide experience of the country. The purpose

of the map is to get us into the country and prevent us from getting lost in our travels.

Exploring the Neighbourhood of Creation

We wake up each morning to a world we did not make. How did it get here? How did we get here? We open our eyes and see that 'old bowling ball the sun' career over the horizon. We wiggle our toes. A mocking bird takes off, improvising on themes set down by robins, vireos and wrens, and we marvel at the intricacies. The smell of

and constricting. Somewhere along the way this exponential expansion of awareness, this wide-eyed looking around, this sheer untaught delight in what is here, reverses itself: the world contracts; we are reduced to a life of routine through which we sleepwalk.

But not for long. Someone always shows up to wake us up: a child's question, a fox's sleek beauty, a sharp pain, a pastor's sermon, a fresh metaphor, an artist's vision, a slap in the face, scent from a crushed violet. We are again awake, alert, in wonder: how did this happen? And why this? Why anything at all and not nothing at all?

Thank-you, God

Gratitude is our spontaneous response to all this: to *life*. Something wells up within us: thank you! More often than not, the thank you is directed to God, even by those who don't believe in him.

Jimmy Drescher was a young man in my congregation. He and his wife were enthusiastic participants, but then the weeds of the worldly care choked their young faith. They acquired children. They became suddenly wealthy and their lives filled up with boats and cars, house-building and social engagements. They were less and less frequently in worship. Two years or so went by without coming to church. And then one bright sunshiney Sunday Jimmy showed up in worship. Surprised to see him I said, 'Jimmy! What brought you to church today?' He said, 'I woke this morning feeling so good, so blessed, I just had to say thank you, and this is the only place I could think to say it rightly, adequately.' (There is a sequel to this moment, which many of you can document yourselves. Jimmy didn't come back again for a long time—five years it was—and then in a very different frame of mind. His wife had left him, his emotions were in chaos, his children a

mess. Pain brought him back the next time, and this time he stayed.)

Thank you, God. Not just 'thanks', and not 'Thank It'. We find ourselves in a lavish existence of living; we say thanks with our lives to Life. Most of the people who have lived on this planet earth have identified this *You* with God or gods. This is not just a matter of learning our manners, the way children are taught to say thank you as a social grace. It is the cultivation of adequateness within ourselves to the nature of reality, developing the capacity to sustain an adequate response to the overwhelming giftedness of life.

*Creation is not something
we figure out, or deduce,
or argue—it is what
we believe: Credo.*

frying bacon works its way into our nostrils and we begin anticipating buttered toast, scrambled eggs, and coffee freshly brewed from our favourite Javanese beans.

There is so much *here*—around, above, below, inside, outside. We can account for very little of it. We notice this, then that. We start exploring the neighbourhood. We try this street, and then that one. We venture across the tracks. Before long we are looking out through telescopes and down into microscopes, curious, fascinated by this endless proliferation of sheer *Isness*—colour and shape and texture and sound.

After a while, of course, we get used to it and quit noticing. We get narrowed down into something small

The Kerygma of Creation

There is more to this than exploring the neighbourhood—most of what we are dealing with is not in the neighbourhood.

The birth of Jesus

Naturally, we are interested in what is behind all this: meaning and purpose and implications. We begin by believing in God. Creation is not something we figure out, or deduce, or argue—it is what we believe: *Credo*. 'By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things that do not appear' (Heb 11:3).

There is a great deal of interest these days in what is sometimes called 'creation spirituality.' There is something very attractive about it: it is so clean and uncomplicated and non-controversial. And obvious. Here we can get God without all the complications of theology and the mess of church history and the incompetence of pastors and appeals for money. This is a spirituality that prefers beautiful beaches and fine

sunsets, surfing and skiing, and body massage, emotional states and aesthetic titillation. For all its considerable attractions, it is considerably deficient in person.

Our Christian scriptures take quite a different tack: God reveals himself most completely in a named person: Jesus. We begin in Jesus. The *kerygma* of Jesus – proclaimed Good News.

The Genesis stories of creation begin environmentally, but that turns out to be the requisite context for the creation of human life, man and woman, designated 'image of God.' Man and woman are alive with the very breath (or spirit) of God. If you want to look at creation full, creation at its highest, you look at a person—a man, a woman, a child. This faddish preference for a bouquet of flowers over a squalling baby, for a day on the beach rather than rubbing shoulders with uncongenial neighbours in a cold church, is understandable, but is also decidedly not creation in the terms it has been revealed to us.

The centre of creation spirituality is Jesus; and the *kerygmatic* focus for this creation spirituality is achieved in the proclamation of his birth. Birth. And in this case 'virgin birth.' God is 'maker of heaven and earth,' true. But all the 'heaven and earth' stuff turns out to be a warm-up exercise for the main-event creation of human life. In St John's gospel's re-writing of Genesis he states, 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory' (Jn 1:14). St Matthew and St Luke begin their gospel stories with detailed accounts of Jesus' birth. St Paul in the first written reference to Jesus' birth calls Jesus the 'firstborn of creation' (Col. 1:15).

The secret of creation

In the act of believing in creation, we accept and enter into and submit to

what God does. We are not spectators of creation but participants in it. We are participants first of all by simply being born, but our birth is in the defining context of Jesus' birth.

We begin with Jesus. Jesus is the revelation of the God who created heaven and earth; he is also the revelation of the God who is with us, Immanuel. Karl Barth goes into immense detail to make this single point: 'We have established that from every angle Jesus Christ is the key to the secret of creation' (CD III/ 1/ 28).

Every birth can, if we let it, return us to the wonder of Jesus' birth: the revelation of sheer life, God's life with us and for us. God is a creator, and his primary work of creation is human life, a baby. And we, as participants in creation, do it too. When we beget and conceive, give birth to and raise babies we are in on the heart of creation. There is more gospel in all those 'begats' in the genealogical lists of our scriptures than we ever dreamed.

A baby's birth

A few years ago I was invited by my daughter-in-law to be present at the birth of her second child. She knew how disappointed I was in never being permitted to be in on the birth of my own three children. In the days Jan and I were having children, fathers were relegated to 'outer darkness' at the time and place of birth. So, what I had missed with my own children, by her generosity I experienced with this grandchild...

I have climbed numerous mountain peaks that gave me vistas of rolling ranges of glaciated mountains, but none of those breathtaking vistas was comparable to seeing that baby enter the world; I have heard the most delicate and exquisite birdsong and some of the best musicians in the world, but no sounds rivalled the cries

of that baby. I was a latecomer to this experience that is common to the human race as a whole. I was captured by the wonder of life, the miracle of life, the mystery of life, the glory of life.

The next day I was in the grocery store getting some vegetables for the family and there were several mothers in the aisles with young children—many of them were snarling and snapping at the over-lively, curiosity-filled, energy-splattering kids. I wanted to grab them, embrace them, and say, 'Do you realise what you have done? You have given birth to a child, a *child*—this miracle, this wonder, this glory? Why aren't you in awe and on your knees like the magi,

none of those breathtaking vistas was comparable to seeing that baby enter the world

like the shepherds?' But I restrained myself.

Birth, any birth, is our primary access to the creation work of God the Father. And Jesus' virgin birth proclaims the gospel involved in that creation.

Dishonouring the Father: Gnosticism

But this has never been an easy truth for people to swallow. Birth is painful, babies are inconvenient and messy. There is immense trouble involved in having children. God having a baby? It's far easier to accept God as the creator of the majestic mountains, the rolling sea, the delicate wildflowers, fanciful unicorns, and tigers burning bright.

When it comes to the sordid squalor of human being-ness, God is surely going to keep his distance from that. We have deep aspirations native to our souls to escape this business of nappies and debts, government taxes and domestic trivia. We were created for higher things; there is a world of subtle ideas and fine feelings.

Boutique spirituality

Somewhere along the way these people realise that their souls are different—a cut above the masses, the common herd of philistines that trample the courts of the Lord. They become connoisseurs of the sublime.

If we are going to be truly spiritual beings, we need to free ourselves of all that is unspiritual.

Some of our most celebrated poets and writers reinforce this spiritual preference for the non-human over the human. Walt Whitman, for all his celebration of common men and women compared us unfavourably to animal. As it turned out, the ink was barely dry in the stories telling of the birth of Jesus, before they were busy putting out alternative stories. These alternate stories proved very attractive to a lot of people. They still are.

In these accounts of the Christian life, the hard-edged particularities of Jesus' life are blurred into the sublime divine: boutique spirituality. That is, the hard, historical factuality of the incarnation, the word made flesh as God's full and complete revelation of himself, is dismissed as crude.

Something finer and more palatable to sensitive souls is put in its place. Jesus was not truly flesh and blood, but entered a human body temporarily in order to give us the inside story on God and initiate us into the secrets of the spiritual life. And of course he didn't die on the cross, but made his exit at the last minute. The body that was taken from the cross for burial was not Jesus at all, but a kind of costume he used for a few years and then discarded.

It turned out that Jesus merely rôle-played a historical flesh-and-blood Christ for a brief time, and then returned to a purely spiritual realm. In the spiritual life, we follow his lead—putting up with materiality and locale and family for as much and as long as it is necessary, but only for as much and as long as necessary. The material, the physical, the body-history and geography and weather—is temporary scaffolding; the sooner we learn to get along without it, the better.

The attractions of this kind of thing are considerable. The feature attraction is that we no longer have to take seriously, that is with eternal seriousness, God seriousness, either things or people—anything you can touch, smell, or see is not of God in any direct or immediate way. We save ourselves an enormous amount of inconvenience and aggravation by putting materiality of every kind at the edge of our lives. Mountains are nice as long as they inspire lofty thoughts, but if one stands in the way of my convenience, a bulldozer can be called in to get rid of it. (Didn't Jesus say something like this that faith was useful for getting rid of mountains? If a bulldozer can do the same thing, isn't it already pre-sanctioned by Jesus?)

People are glorious as long as they are good-looking, well-mannered,

bolster my self-esteem and help me fulfil my human potential, but if they smell badly or function poorly they certainly deserve to be dismissed. (It's what Jesus did, isn't it? When Peter proved incompetent spiritually Jesus curtly dismissed him with the rebuke: 'Get behind me Satan!') If we are going to be truly spiritual beings, we need to free ourselves of all that is unspiritual.

The accompanying attraction to this refined life is that when we engage in it we find ourselves members of an elite spiritual aristocracy. We are insiders to God, privileged members of the ultimate 'club'—the Inner Ring of Enlightened Souls.

An elite spiritual aristocracy

This all sounds and feels so good that there are very few of us who have been involved in religion who haven't given it a try. No church is safe from its influence, and no one who desires to live a godly life is impervious to its attraction.

Some of you will remember that Gnostic is the name we often use to designate this most attractive but soul-destroying spirituality. Gnosticism is a virus in the bloodstream of religion and keeps resurfacing every generation or so advertised as brand new, replete with a new brand name. On examination, though, it turns out to be the same old thing under new management. Gnosticism offers us a spirituality without the inconvenience of creation.

St John's Gospel is our most vigorous scriptural polemic against this de-materialized, elitist spirituality, but our entire scriptures are arrayed against it. But however attractive, it dishonours the Father: God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, God the Father of whom Jesus is the only-begotten Son. The world the Father makes, the Son the Father

begets, are denied or ignored or avoided, but however it happens, it amounts to desecration of the Father, dishonouring the Father.

Cultivating the Honour of God the Father

The Christian community has never supposed that its work was done by simply saying all this. It *has* said it, and written it, and taught and preached it. We have to know the God-reality in which we are placed in order to live appropriately and adequately in it, but we also have to cultivate a believing imagination and a faithful obedience that is appropriate and adequate to this. We embrace life-loving... in God's terms, in God's way, God-defined. So, what do we do to cultivate the honour of God the Father?

Attend and adore!

The counsel and guidance of Scripture and Church is simple and succinct... Quit! Attend and adore. Keep the Lord's Day. And it gives a simple and uncomplicated direction. The most striking thing about keeping the Lord's Day is that it begins by not doing anything. The Hebrew word, *shabbat*, which we take over untranslated into our language simply means, 'Quit... Stop... Take a Break.'

As such, it has no religious or spiritual content: Whatever you are doing, Stop it... Whatever you are saying, shut up... Sit down and take a look around you... Don't do anything... Don't say anything.

But it soon appears that there is more to it than a not-doing, a not-talking. The word arrives on the page of Genesis in the context of creation, God the Father making heaven and earth. When the work was complete God stopped speaking, stopped

making. (Gen. 2:1-4.) The not-doing, in other words, takes place in the context of much-doing.

Theological and social reasons

When this not-doing is given at Sinai as a command for us to keep, two different reasons are provided to support it, one in the Exodus account, the other in Deuteronomy. The first is this is what God did; God worked and then quit working (Ex 20:8-11).

The second reason is that when his people were slaves in Egypt it was work, work, work—incessant, unrelieved work; they must never perpetuate such oppression; they must quit work each seventh day so that their slaves and livestock and children will get a day off (Dt. 5:12-15). The Exodus reason is theological—this is the way God does it; the Deuteronomy reason is social—this is simple justice.

This precedent (Genesis) and command (Exodus and Deuteronomy) became deeply embedded in the life of Israel. But it was never simply not-doing—the context wouldn't permit it. Human not-doing became a day of God-honouring. God worked in creation (Genesis); God worked in salvation (Exodus)—all our work is done in that context of God-work. Sabbath is a weekly act of no-work so that we are able to notice, to attend, to listen, to assimilate this comprehensive and majestic work of God.

If there is no Sabbath—no regular and commanded not-working, not talking—we become totally absorbed in what we are doing and saying, and God's work is either forgotten or marginalized. Our work becomes the context in which we define our lives. We lose God-consciousness, God-awareness. We lose the capacity to sing 'This is my Father's world' and end up chirping little self-centred

ditties about what we are doing and feeling.

Oppressive sabbath regimes

As you well know, this is a most difficult command to keep, a most difficult practice to cultivate. It is one of the most abused and distorted practices of the Christian life. Many of you have suffered much under oppressive sabbath regimes. It may even be that some of you are among the oppressors. Jesus spent a good deal of his time at odds with people who had wrong ideas about keeping sabbath. We can't expect an easy time of it ourselves.

Our work becomes the context in which we define our lives.

But I don't see any way out of it: if we are going to honour the Father, we must stop what we are doing, saying—and especially the things we are doing for God, saying for God. We must stop running around long enough to see what he has done and is doing. We must shut up long enough to hear what he has said and is saying. All our ancestors agree that without silence and stillness there is no spirituality, no God-attentive, God-responsive life.

But I do have a suggestion: re-imagine, re-structure, restore the Lord's Day as a day of not-doing, not-saying. Free the Presbyterians of Scotland and Ireland regularly and frequently to do nothing. Gathering for Lord's Day worship has a long and honourable tradition among us and provides the

best way for most of us to attend to the Father in his revelation in Jesus. But we need to keep it simple.

Clear out the clutter of Sundays

Ministers and kirk-sessions commonly cram the Lord's Day with work: committees and meetings and projects and mission and social activities, putting much doing and much talking in the place of sabbath quietness and stillness. We have these people for just one day a week and want to get them involved in everything we think will be good for their souls, and good for the church. Well-intentioned, but dead wrong. All we do is get them so busy for the Lord that they have no time for the Lord; pour in so much information about God that they never have a chance to listen to God.

Clear out the clutter of Sundays for a start. And then engage in corporate ways to do nothing, to say nothing: in quietness and rest you shall be saved. Cultivate solitude. Cultivate silence. There is nothing novel in what I am saying; this is counsel at the centre of those who have led us into an obedient and faithful life of mission and prayer for 20 centuries now. I have nothing new to say on the subject, but I am convinced that it is critical to say it again, to say it urgently, to say it in Jesus' name: keep the Lord's Day—attend... adore. Honour the Father.

If we are not simply to contribute a religious dimension to the disintegration of our world, join company with the mobs who are desecrating the creation with their hurry and hype, in frenzy and noise, we must attend to God and adore him. One large step in the renewal of the church today is to take a stop break by attending for Jesus, *begotten* of the Father. Attend. Adore and begin. Attention. Adoration.

Postmodernism

The second of two articles by
Dominic Smart

Minister of Logie & St John's Cross Parish Church, Dundee

In the first article I sketched a portrait of two postmoderns, Najat and Fiona, and began to look at the major colours on the paint palette—the major themes of postmodernism. In this second article, I want to look at three more themes: incoherence, and then, more briefly, at pluralism and at the individualism regarding morality. As we'll see, they are closely connected to the first, dominant colour on the palette: 'incredulity regarding meta-narratives' or, in normal English, disbelief in big stories.

Incoherence

If you have got a grasp of there being no big stories, then you will see that it is a short step to incoherence. Without the meta-narrative, nothing hangs together anymore. Elements of what we might broadly call 'culture' no longer stick together because of their inherent characteristics. I want to discuss incoherence within three respects: 'double coding', 'direction and progress' and then 'meaning, what meaning?'

Double coding

If you think back to Najat and Fiona's flat in Kelvinside, you will recall their diverse and eclectic taste: objects which look ancient, unashamedly modern items, things which definitely do not belong to a rationalist techno-science world and things which do. Their laptop computer, their sound system and hi-tech tv, some of the art on their walls, all cohabit with icons from Byzantium, and a wrought iron, mock verdigris table lamp which looks old but which actually came from last year's *Past Times* catalogue.

One writer whose work is crucial to understanding our postmodernism is the architect Charles Jencks. It was Jencks who, more than any other, gave the term 'postmodern' its currency, initially within the world of architecture but his analyses and articulation of postmodernism have shaped its development well beyond that world. Jencks writes about postmodernism looking backwards and also forwards, as well as looking to elite as well as to popular audiences. He calls it double coding. Postmodernity looks to the rationale and products of techno-science, but then rejects these, or adds

to them styles and thinking from much earlier architectural and cultural forms. By this process emerges something new. This is from his very readable book *What Is Post-Modernism?*

[Double coding] is the combination of modern techniques with something else, usually a traditional building, in order for architecture to communicate with the public and a concerned minority, usually other architects. Today's postmodern architects were trained by modernists and are committed to using modern contemporary technology as well as facing current social reality.

The most notable, and perhaps the best, use of this double coding in architecture is James Stirling's addition to the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. Here one can find the fabric of the city and the existing museum extended in amusing and ironic ways. The U-shaped palazzo form of the old gallery is echoed and placed on a high plinth, or acropolis, above the traffic. But this classical base holds a very real and necessary parking

garage, one which is ironically indicated by stones which have 'fallen' like ruins to the ground. The resultant holes show the real construction – not the thick marble blocks of the real Acropolis, but a steel frame holding stone cladding which allows the air ventilation required by law.

One can sit on these false ruins and ponder the truth of our lost innocence: that we live in an age which can build with beautiful, expressive masonry as long as we make it skin-deep and hang it on a steel skeleton.¹

If you visit a post-colonial city you see a city that was once built with a very clear sense of what was progress and direction.

You may have seen photos of Philip Johnson's AT&T building (1982) in New York City, a modern skyscraper, built in 1982, but with a vast Chippendale-style scroll top. Like the Staatsgalerie, it is the product of 'an architecture that was professionally-based and popular, as well as one that was based on new techniques and old patterns.'²

I have used examples from architecture partly to introduce Charles Jencks, but also as a fairly visual motif for this far wider cultural process of double coding. You can see it in many other areas of culture: from the novel to New Labour. It is important to understand this combination of incoherent elements—the modern with the non-modern. But it is also

important to understand that while it may seem to critics to be merely casual incoherence and messy inconsistency, it is the natural outcome of the breakdown of big stories. As such, double coding represents to its protagonists a new kind of coherence. Not that which is created by inherently cohesive qualities of the various elements, created and arranged by a dominant meta-narrative, but that which is created by the individual tastes, eccentricities, preferences and backgrounds of postmodern people.

Direction and Progress

Second, because of the lack of a big picture, ideas like direction and progress become mere imponderables, with history having no identifiable course. Who are you to define what progress is? Who are you to define what direction is? But this lack of a consensus about their definition yields a further level of incoherence.

We can see an illustration of that when we use another 'post' word: post-colonialism. If you visit a post-colonial city you see a city that was once built with a very clear sense of what was progress and direction. The colonists laid out streets according to plans based on certain concepts of order, good health and ease of administration. They built in a particular style according to the values of the home country. They organised the city, and thus its inhabitants, as they built it. They had a clear idea of what was progress and what was not. But in most post-colonial countries nobody seems to know where the city is going any more. The fabric and infra-structure of many post colonial cities fall apart because the narrative centre no longer holds, and urban anarchy is loosed upon the inhabitants. Take away the big story and you lose direction and progress, whether that is expressed in

town planning, wider social and political policies, art and literature, the growth and nature of business or countless other ways.

Meaning, What meaning?

But, third and possibly most disturbingly, in an incoherent world meaning begins to disappear. Remember that the meta-narratives define what is true, false and how you decide it. The meta-narratives decide what is acceptable and where it fits in with everything else. By providing a context the big story provides meaning. (Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile could at least mean something as long as it remains where it is in the picture. The smile has no meaning itself if it is excised and put somewhere else.)

Meaning disappears partly because the context provided by the meta-narrative, with its particular ideas and values, crumbles. But it also disappears because the big story was understood and accepted by a significant number of people engaged in a significant spread of cultural and personal activities. It carried a unifying consensus about what things mean and what words might mean. In the postmodern world, that unifying consensus of ideas and values is vanishing.

Back to Najat and Fiðna's flat for a trivial but relevant example. The icons face, across the living room, the Ben Nicholson and Paul Klee prints. Now, anybody who thinks like Ben Nicholson or Paul Klee does not think like the Byzantine artists who produced the icons. The people who produced the icons believed in particular ways and with a particular shared content to their belief in God. The image functioned as a sign, to point believers to God. The work of Nicholson and Klee points to human rationality and logical order (Nicholson) or the world

of human dreams and imagination (Klee). But because the icons have been taken away from their generative context of belief in God they can hang in the same room as Nicholson's and Klee's work and nobody—even if they recognise the paintings—bats an eyelid. Najat and Fiona simply thought they looked quite nice together: a bit of diversity, a bit of variety. They 'do something' for our young postmoderns. But the original meanings are unknown, irrelevant, lost in the incoherence of postmodernity.

We can no longer appeal to a commonly acknowledged big story. What a picture or a poem or a passage in Scripture means is really only what it means to me. Meaning becomes localised. It becomes individualised and privatised. Even at its most communal, it is only a matter of sporadic or momentarily orchestrated individualism.

Under these conditions, hermeneutics change significantly. In fact the way we interpret texts leads to the question asked by Stanley Fish: *Is there a Text in this Class?*³ (His answer is 'No'.) Perhaps a helpful way to approach the shift in hermeneutics is to start with the traditional axiom that words are regarded as signs.

Now signs are recognised as signs because there is a distinction between the thing that is pointing and the thing to which it is pointing. The town of Forfar is not the same as the sheet of metal bearing the letters F-o-r-f-a-r. In the language of Jacques Derrida⁴ and others, the signpost is the 'signifier', and the thing to which it is pointing is the 'signified'. Traditionally words have been regarded as signs because their meaning derives from the link between them and the event, object, idea which they 'designate'. They are signs because there is something else

to point to which gives the meaning: the signified.

But if you take away the big picture, the meta-narrative, which provides the context and thus the meaning of events or words, then you eliminate the distinction between the sign and the thing signified. There is no objective, designated meaning pointed to by the word. You just have the word. You just have the text in front of you, which carries no meaning of its own. It therefore—to answer Fish's question—ceases to function as a text, which communicates meaning from author to reader: it becomes only what each reader makes of it. Is there a text in this church, or General Assembly, or divinity seminar? No.

It is a massive shift to take place, whether it happens in the seemingly remote world of academic hermeneutics or at a popular level. What it means is that words are devalued because the value of words as signs is found in what they are pointing to and in their effectiveness in pointing to it. If we destroy the distinction between signified and signifier then we have devalued a word or a passage. When we have devalued the word we can then 'revalue' it according to what we want it to mean.

Such is the process of the particular and radical form of reader-response hermeneutics known as 'deconstructionism'. The intentions and world of the author, and of previous interpreters, are dismantled—deconstructed—from a text, and then a meaning is constructed from the building blocks of one's own experience or intellectual community. It is the response that the word creates in the mind of the reader that is the crucial thing.

Let me string together one or two quotes. The first from Don Carson's book *The Gagging of God*:

In academic biblical studies, postmodernism links with the 'new' literary criticism to create endless 'fresh' readings, many of them clever, and parts of them insightful, even if, taken as a whole, their insight is more and more removed from reasoned and defensible anchorage in the text.⁵

Well, we know why it is 'more and more removed from reason and defensible anchorage in the text'; the fresh readings come entirely from the world of the reader.

The second quote is from Roger Lundin, Anthony Thistleton and

If we destroy the distinction between signified and signifier then we have devalued a word or a passage.

Clarence Walhout. They are discussing the work of Stanley Fish, and after quoting his aphorism 'The reader's response is not to the meaning, it is the meaning' go on to write:

expressed negatively, a text does not generate determinate meaning independently of social and institutional circumstances. The reader and the reader's social-ethical-intellectual community contribute decisively to the final meaning of the text.⁶

What, then, does John 1:1-14 mean? It means whatever your response is. In fact the question, 'What does it mean?' becomes redundant, replaced by the question, 'What does it do?' The meaning, which does not lie with the author's world which we cannot get

into, is found when we deconstruct it from the author's world, that is, we remove it from the layers of the author's own particular world. (Derrida sometimes uses the term 'desedimentation' to describe the process.) Having peeled back all the layers that belong to the author's world, and looked at the text as if it was written this morning, the text means what you, with your own particular 'sediments', want it to mean. (Which incidentally prevents an author from claiming that he or she has been misconstrued!)

The task of exposition thus changes to become the diametric opposite of what it has been taken to be. No longer

*I cannot see in our present
culture a more complete
reversal of the life of faith as
Luther described it.*

does the expositor do an exegesis of the passage. Now he does exegesis of himself. Hermeneutics becomes the interpretation of self; heuristics becomes the discovery of self.

It would be difficult, as an evangelical, to see in what way a deconstructionist can regard the Bible as the word of God to be obeyed epistemologically. It cannot be the word of anyone except the word of self. Personally, I cannot see in our present culture a more complete reversal of the life of faith as Luther described it. No longer, on this line, are we *excurvatus ex se*—turned outwards from ourselves. Now we are returned to that fallen condition of being *incurvatus in se*—turned in upon ourselves. God's grace is replaced by our narcissism.

What applies to the interpretation of a text applies elsewhere. You can construct the meaning of an event or you can construct the meaning of anything—a person's character, intentions or integrity for instance. You, and those who think like you, can construct your own world and that world is reality. It's not just your version of reality as if reality was something else that we all have different versions of: it *is* reality.

You would see something of the depth at which postmodernity has changed our culture. We have long since moved from the days of absolutes, and have now passed through the days of relative absolutes (that is, in your world view certain things operate as absolutes, and in my world view different things operate as absolutes, but they are all relative to a greater reality). We are now entering the world of absolute relativism, as Derrida calls it.

Roger Lundin makes the point very well; he is quoting Stanley Fish again:

As Fish puts it, the vocabulary of postmodernity is committed to promoting a vision of humans as the species *Homo rhetoricus*, rather than *Homo seriusus*. To define *Homo rhetoricus*, Fish quotes Richard Lanham, a theorist of rhetoric: [*Homo rhetoricus*] assumes a natural agility in changing orientations.... From birth almost he has dwelt not in a single-value structure but in several. He is thus committed to no single construction of the world.... He accepts the present paradigm and explores its resources. Rhetorical man is not trained to discover reality but to manipulate it. Reality is what is accepted as reality, what is useful.

Picking up the argument on his own, Fish explains that rhetorical man manipulates reality, establishing

through his words the imperatives and urgencies to which he and his fellows must respond. Perhaps the most important thing to understand about *Homo rhetoricus* is that 'by exploring the available means of persuasion in a particular situation he tries them on, and as they begin to suit him, he becomes them.'⁷

Now, examples in popular culture are myriad. In the first place it means the triumph of the image over meaning. Images do not point to anything anymore. Thus the icons do not point to God any more; they just look nice on the wall. The icon is just a thing in itself, whose only meaning is what it 'does' for Najat and Fiona.

Thus we have a character like Madonna (herself something of an icon of popular postmodernism), who constantly reinvents her own image. It does not matter that one year she is something which is a flat contradiction of what she was the previous year. All she ever wants to be taken as is the image at that moment. And she is not going to take the image too seriously because she means nothing by it.

Thus we have the proliferation of spin doctors, who place the construction on reality that they want other people to accept—reinventing the politician's gaff to mean something else; describing a by-election defeat as a victory. Thus we have, as some people have called postmodernism, shopping. I do not mean the normal activity of shopping. I mean what Os Guinness, in his book *Fit Bodies, Fat Minds*, calls 'the cannibalism of PoMo'. Najat and Fiona have thrown together Nat King Cole, Mozart, Carols from Kings, Madonna, and Bananarama because they shop from different cultures, ideologies, value-systems, meta-narratives. In their 'pick 'n mix' postmodernity they do not care that Carols from Kings say something

fundamentally different from what Madonna is saying. Who cares if it is incoherent? It does not have to be coherent any more.

Pluralism

The next major colour on the PoMo palette is pluralism. I hope that it will be apparent that the pluralistic nature of postmodernity follows from the lack of a meta-narrative and the ensuing incoherence. In *The Gagging of God*, Don Carson has very helpfully given a threefold definition of pluralism.⁸

Empirical pluralism

First, he identifies *empirical pluralism*: the factual diversity of religions, traditions and customs which coexist in societies all over the world. Essential to this pluralism is religious tolerance, but it is worth noting that while tolerance is nothing new in itself, its basis is not what it used to be. The toleration which is part and parcel of pluralism goes back to social and political thinking by Christians. It goes back to the 17th century, to 1689 and the Act of Toleration in England. That was put in place because people believed so confidently in a biblical meta-narrative that there was no need to worry about the existence of other religious views. There were felt to be sufficient grounds in Christianity for it to prove its own case. Toleration was founded upon a confidence in the gospel. But that was back in 1689. Now, toleration is founded on precisely the opposite of that, on what the English poet Thom Gunn once called in a radio interview, 'carrying the courage of our lack of conviction'.

Cherished pluralism

Second, Carson describes what he calls *cherished pluralism* which is the

empirical pluralism with approval; 'not just a raw datum' but 'a good thing'. Cherished pluralism thus asserts that to deny diversity and limit freedom to exercise choices is bad. But cherishing the empirical pluralism in society means (ironically) intolerance of those elements which make exclusive truth-claims. The underlying assumption is that all the elements of cultural mix are equally valid: no-one is wrong, apart from those who claim that they alone are right. While this may provide a means of protecting minorities from oppression, it also creates a minority which is subtly oppressed by the very cherishing of diversity.

Philosophical pluralism

Third, Carson identifies 'by far the most serious development': *philosophical* or *hermeneutical pluralism*. We have already seen how the radical hermeneutics of deconstructionism both rely upon and reinforce the removal of an objective meaning to texts. The corollary of that position is, right and wrong are categories which we cannot employ anymore. Right and wrong belong to the world of the big stories, coherence, given structures and objective meaning. To say that anyone is mistaken in their reading of a passage of Scripture is thus, in Carson's words, to 'display an old-fashioned bigotry'. It smacks of a chauvinistic authoritarianism in matters of personal conviction.

At a profound level in our society we have a functioning rule that no-one can be wrong (with the addition, *sotto voce*, 'especially me, but you might be the exception'). At a more superficial, cultural level we have political correctness and the anathematising of anything slightly hurtful or rude. The ultimate sin is to hurt someone's (particularly my) feelings. Remember that Najat and Fiona are very nice

people. Fiona is a natural for the customer relations department. She is not going to offend anybody at all.

Individualism Regarding Morality

This final colour on the postmodern palette needs, by now, little description. If you have constructed your own world of meaning, you can construct your own world of what is right and wrong. You can construct your own morality and as long as you share it with a few people, sometimes a lot of people when something big happens, then that is

Cherished pluralism thus asserts that to deny diversity and limit freedom to exercise choices is bad.

fine, though it is little more than collective individualism.

Certain problems arise of course: How do you get from 'is' to 'ought'? how do you get from the fact of a man lying in the ditch to the ought of going and helping him? If you have lost the big picture you have lost the narrative which defines how you respond to the facts—and given that facts are theory-laden, what are the facts anymore?

Further, if language is in part performative, it does something that happens to what it does. You promise to do something, and the language game says that if you make a promise you keep it. But if it is just a language game and language is up to you to fill out with your own meaning, you do not have to keep your promises

anymore, and it does not really matter if you don't because that's your choice and you are sovereign within your constructed world. Postmodernism begins to spell the end of morality and immorality, and rewrites a culture of amorality.

Problems with PoMo

I want to finish these two articles by very briefly pointing to some of the problems that postmodernism presents.

An irony

First of all, postmodernism is ironically beginning to function like a meta-narrative. It will, we must assume, fail to deliver the goods of emancipation from the all-confining and restraining narratives that other people have come up with. And it will fail to deliver the goods because if everything is ultimately a matter of taste we have sown the seeds of the very oppression that postmodernism seeks to evade. For once individuals are armed with sufficient money or guns or with a professionally constructed image they are handed the means of manipulation and social control. The seeds of oppression are as easily cultivated in the soil of individualism as they are in the soil of totalitarianism.

Rootlessness

Secondly, if everything is merely a matter of taste we create 'generation x' as the student generation is sometimes called. We create a generation which is rootless because there is no meaning in which to anchor our lives anymore. We create a generation which suffers from the postmodern malaise of insignificance; a generation of people who are desperately trying to give themselves significance because no

meta-narrative exists to give it to them anymore. What do I mean in the world? Why get up in the morning?

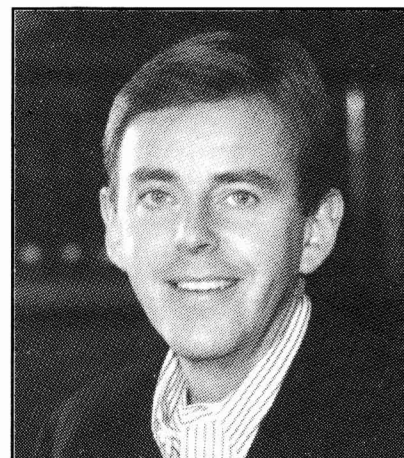
God de-deified

Finally, for us there is a clutch of theological problems on top of the hermeneutical ones. God is not God anymore. God is one site on a world-wide web and you can visit him if you want to and then move away again and look at the religious web sites. God is not almighty, and the one with whom we will all have to do. Sin is not sin. Wittgenstein (who was not a postmodernist!) had a lovely line in *Culture and Value* which would appeal to any thorough-going postmodernist, 'The way to solve a problem you see in life is to live in a way which will make what is problematic disappear'. Sin is not sin anymore. Salvation thus becomes politically incorrect, because you cannot call anyone a sinner. Grace

is what we're owed anyway. Sanctification is on your own terms and you are not on your way anywhere because there is no progress anymore; so where does your eschatology go, and what is heaven?

Notes

- 1 Charles Jencks, *What Is Post-Modernism?* (London, Academy Editions, 1986).
- 2 *ibid*
- 3 Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class?* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980).
- 4 See, for instance, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1974).
- 5 Donald A. Carson, *The Gagging of God*, (Leicester, Apollos, 1996) p.29.
- 6 Roger Lundin, Anthony Thistleton and Clarence Walhout, *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, (Exeter, The Paternoster Press Ltd, 1985) pp.94 & 95.
- 7 Roger Lundin, the 'Pragmatics of Postmodernity', in Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm eds. *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, (Downers Grove, IVP) p.28.
- 8 Donald A. Carson, *op cit.* pp13ff.



Ann Allen meets Alistair Begg

*On the last weekend of September I caught up with Alistair Begg as he preached at a unique teaching event, *Release the Power*, attended by almost 3000 young Scottish Christians. As part of the team preparing that event I had been delighted that we had secured Alistair to give the main Bible readings on the Sermon on the Mount. He held his audience transfixed by the clear and practical exposition of the word and after it was all over we had this conversation over a reviving cup of coffee.*

Alistair, after 14 years in the USA are you thoroughly Americanised or are you still a homesick Scot?

I really do have a continuing sense of indebtedness that my roots and identity are in and with Scotland. I haven't taken out American citizenship because, although I greatly appreciate so much of the States, I also appreciate I'll always be different, on the outside. I haven't bought into the American package and that helps me not to lose my objectivity on how my ministry

develops. It's hard for us to get a grip on the Church in the States because of its size and fragmentation.

Where do you fit in to the theological jigsaw over there?

I pastor an independent evangelical church in Cleveland, Ohio called Parkside. It is baptistic in sacrament but Presbyterian in government so you could say it has the best of both worlds. Cleveland suits me because it is about as 'normal' as you get in the USA... it must be one of the most ordinary places to live and work and I've been there now for 14 years.

What changes have you seen in your time there?

There would have been around 450 in membership when I went there and joined a ministry team of youth worker and worship leader. Over the years we have seen growth and encouragement. We have a fairly stringent entry point into membership through baptism and

so the membership is now around 1000 with around 3000 in the worshipping community.

How have you coped with such expansion?

In America, you cope partly by adding to your team and I have a great group who direct youth and children's ministries, adult education, worship, pastoral care, college and singles' work. We have seven office staff and I have a right hand man in my Director of Ministries who keeps his finger on the pulse of the church, the staff, and me.

How has that affected your role in the congregation?

I suppose I have been responsible for establishing the overarching vision for the congregation. We march to the distinctive drumbeat of the teaching ministry. I am a leader among leaders, happy to delegate and yet have people answerable to me as I am to the congregation. The establishment of

I am clear and comfortable about delegation. I trust my team and staff and let them get on and do their jobs.

the team is really how America responds to growth and as a continuing guest in their country, I'm alive to the subtleties and peculiarities of that.

So that has released you to be the teaching elder?

I see my role very much in terms of Ephesians 4:11-12. I'm a pastor and teacher called to edify and do the works of ministry. I am not a talking head. A minister who is invisible during the week is generally incomprehensible on Sundays. People are books so I am vitally involved in the life stages of my folk. At birth, marriage, death, and the crises in between. Aptitudinally, theologically and philosophically that is imperative for me. I cut my teeth pounding round houses with Derek Prime when I was assistant in Charlotte Chapel. I visited my brains out for 2 years and that was indispensable training for the pastorate. However, I am clear and comfortable about delegation. I trust my team and staff and let them get on and do their jobs.

As leader among leaders, how have you sought to train people?

One of the best things I ever did was to bring the eldership of the church together on Saturday mornings and for a year together we went through *Know the Truth*, Bruce Milne's book. That text leaves freedom for thought and discussion and yet gently steers in the right direction. That helped us clarify and change in many areas.

Would you say it is easier to be a Christian in the USA because of the kind of Christian subculture?

It is easier to witness because in the States people are so open to talk about anything and are very free in giving personal and private information. There is some justification in Jim Packer's remark that the USA Church is 3000

miles wide and 1/2 an inch deep. It is hard here in Scotland but it puts hair on your chest! It's hard in the area of the media so that anything that is done for the gospel is done well whereas in the States the Christian tv is pretty appalling in some areas. However, there is marvellous accessibility to the airwaves.

Your church have turned that to good, haven't they?

Yes. My sermons are now broadcast daily across the country on a programme called, 'Truth for Life' and that gives enormous entrance for the gospel into people's homes. In Scotland, sadly, that just doesn't happen.

Mostly, your visits home coincide with your speaking at big events. Keswick, Spring Harvest, Portstewart. How do you assess the value of these events? Do they still have a place?

Obviously, I think they do. But they are not an existentialist moment. They are best when supplemental to a solid local church ministry. They are not the key to success. It is disaster to live in poverty waiting for the next big meal... they only top up the normal diet. At the lowest common denominator people should go and have a wonderful time. It can be intimidating for pastors. It can make us think! Why do we do what we do? Am I being imaginative, creative? And of course, it can be discouraging. I need the solidity of my home congregation. They stop me from being a 'fathead' when things have gone well, and if I have struggled, they pick me up and support me. There is nothing like two sermons a week to sort you out. It's like taking exams every week!

You don't envisage a calling to be a full time itinerant speaker then?

Absolutely not. A ten suits, ten sermon man lifestyle would be anathema to me!

From these big events, what encourages you and what concerns you?

I'm thrilled by the numbers of young people keen and sincere who are looking for instruction and direction. My concern would be the kind of direction they are given. I've sometimes felt that I am there as the token Bible expositor, and then the real events and entertainment take over. I fear the polarisation of the Spirit and the word and am glad that *Word Alive* had been sought to address that in the balance of their programme. I don't buy into any polarisation of word and Spirit. All spirit and no word, we blow up; all word and no spirit, and we dry up.

Talking of drying up... You are just ending a short sabbatical. Would you encourage folk to take and use that time?

Without a doubt. The principle benefit is being relieved of that 'Sunday morning feeling', of being constantly driven to that deadline in study and preparation. The other benefit is that the congregation realise that you are not indispensable. Of course that can be threatening... maybe some people don't go on Sabbatical in case that happens, but it is good for my folk to know that I am not crucial to their survival and ongoing life.

Needless to say, you haven't just been loafing around. Not content with reading books, you have now turned to writing them. Why? Don't we have saturation on the Christian market for books?

How can I agree with you when I'm adding to that level? But in one sense, I do. I have a door into the book market because I'm a 'name' that's known now through events and radio so it presents an opportunity. Cynically, selling books depends on marketing and exposure in the States.

Next year, I should be in print with

'True Christianity,' an evangelistic book for the guy in the street. A kind of 90's version of *Basic Christianity* starting with the postmodernity mindset. I think my contribution might be, he said humbly!, that what the brilliant Don Carson says in 750 words, I say in 120. That may make me sound like the village idiot, but I think I can disseminate other people's useful thinking and bring it down to street level. If you like, I am more like Ibrox than Twickenham.

Alistair, have we lost you to the States for good?

Realistically, I am there for the present and the future. All the ministries I have most admired and learned from have been long term. 14 years into mine why would I want to start all over and replough the same ground elsewhere and begin relationships all over? At 45 years old, I am more driven I think to be true to my calling as the years roll on. I'm aware of the desperate need for rôle models of clarity and integrity in the pulpits of USA. I'm very conscious of the warning passages in Hebrews that alert us to complacency lest we fall. Young people need models as I did. I'll never forget, for instance, the indelible impression that Dick Lucas' exposition of Romans 5-8 made upon me. The Banner of Truth remains my favourite magazine. I get invited to some strange events but my message doesn't change its tune and I hope I can give the lie to the trend that to be Biblical and doctrinal is synonymous with being stuffy, dry, and dull.

Of the 3000 sixteen to thirty year olds at RTP this weekend, I did not find one who had not been challenged and instructed and thrilled by the way the Sermon on the Mount was taught to them. God has surely raised up Alistair Begg and given him gifts for a significant ministry. Long may he cross the Atlantic to share them with us.

*all spirit and no word, we
blow up; all word and no
spirit, and we dry up*

Book Reviews

1 Corinthians

Charles Hodge

Nottingham, Crossway Books, 1995,
320pp, £9.99

ISBN 1 85684 124 3

2 Corinthians

Charles Hodge

Nottingham, Crossway Books, 1995,
240pp, £8.99

ISBN 1 85684 125 1

The Crossway Classic Commentaries are contemporary editions of older works. In the Series Preface the editors, Alister McGrath and James Packer, state their aim to be 'to make some of the most valuable commentaries on the books of the Bible, by some of the greatest Bible teachers and theologians in the last five hundred years, available to a new generation.' To accomplish this, the original commentaries 'have been abridged as needed, simplified stylistically and unburdened of foreign words'. This is a well-conceived project, and these two volumes successfully bring to any thoughtful Christian, let alone any preacher, Charles Hodge's classic work.

In fact, Hodge responds well to this treatment! It was undoubtedly one of his gifts to clarify the thread of thought which Paul follows through sentence upon sentence of his epistles. These two Crossway editions beautifully show Hodge's ability to communicate Paul's logically sequenced ideas. In so doing, the meaning of the epistles themselves is rendered crystal clear.

Hodge produced his original editions before the rise of modern Pentecostalism or the Charismatic Movement. He was unconcerned in his evangelical theology by questions that pre-occupy, even divide, present evangelicalism. Some of these questions centre on the interpretation of passages in these very epistles. So,

as James Packer points out in his Introduction to 1 Corinthians, you will not find Hodge speaking the last word on, say, the nature of spiritual gifts or the role of women.

But in making Hodge's commentaries so accessible, Crossway has provided two much-needed commodities. First, exegesis that does not treat the epistles (particularly 1 Corinthians) as if it they were written solely to answer our present-day questions. Notwithstanding a few shots aimed at the Roman Catholicism of his day, Hodge wrote his commentaries in order to help readers understand Paul's original meaning. His concern was that the text should be applied truly rather than in a partisan fashion. Second, Hodge gives clear and careful reasons why he interprets a passage or word in the way that he does. If you disagree with him, you will have to think equally clearly and carefully about why: hackneyed clichés or second-hand opinions will not survive the reading of these two commentaries.

One final word. 2 Corinthians tends to be overshadowed by its magisterial predecessor. Yet it is such a heartfelt and passionate epistle that no-one can study or preach through it without profound personal, pastoral benefits. Hodge, for all the logical sharpness of his exegesis, illuminates these features of the second letter superbly. You might find it better to buy this one first.

Dominic Smart, Dundee

The Search For Intimacy

Elaine Storkey

London, Hodder and Stoughton,
1995, 256pp, £7.99

ISBN 0 340 48899 9

Here is a well-informed book on a topic vital to us all. Storkey covers a lot of ground, including intimacy in marriage, friendship and family and

the barriers we face from the past, the chasm between the public and private 'worlds', and the differing needs and experiences of men and women.

One misgiving I have is with Storkey's claim that 'postmodernity... exhibits scepticism... towards the very idea that there are big systems of truth and explanation...' (25). The opposition of most postmodern philosophers to 'grand narratives' is less the result of metaphysical scepticism than ethical concern. The danger they would see in all attempts, including Storkey's, to pin down 'normative structures' (4, 209, 238) is in conceptual systems that close us down to the voices and faces of people in all their pain, joy and individuality. People's stories then get co-opted to illustrate our moral frameworks.

Storkey is largely innocent of this. There is little pontificating and much compassionate wisdom. Her comments about gays and lesbians and those who cohabit, however, strike me as applications of a framework rather than responses to flesh and blood.

But elsewhere, Storkey has read widely and thought deeply, and not at the expense of listening closely. This is a fine book. Warmly recommended.

Nik Ansell, Bath

You Can't Be Serious—

Resurrection: Fact or Fiction?

James Martin

Edinburgh, The Pentland Press, 1995,
85pp, £7.50

ISBN 1 85821 288 X

James Martin takes a familiar path in investigating in a popular form the evidence for the bodily resurrection of Christ. But he sets his exploration in the context of an exchange of letters between a sceptic member, 'John', and his 'minister'. This approach is simple and effective, and complements the

Book Reviews

straightforward style and language of the arguments.

Martin tackles all the usual objections: that the resurrection is simply unbelievable in today's world, that the New Testament accounts are flawed in transmission, that there are contradictions, that the first disciples perpetrated a fraud, or were deluded, that they or Jesus' enemies stole his body, that Jesus only swooned and did not die on the cross, that the appearances were hallucinations, or merely strong but subjective experiences.

He builds a comprehensive and convincing case, drawing on scripture, tradition and reason, to show that the bodily resurrection is quite fundamental to the Church and that there is, quite simply, no convincing alternative to the orthodox view. Martin ends by summarising Jesus' resurrection as 'victory': Jesus is alive and calls us to commit ourselves to him in faith and service.

Preachers will find this short book a useful reminder of the arguments, and doubters will be powerfully challenged.

Andrew Anderson, Edinburgh

Youth Work: and How To Do It

Pete Ward, Sam Adams & Judy Levermore

Oxford, Linx Communications (Lion Publishing), 1994, 158pp, £8.00
ISBN 0 7459 2879 X

The introduction answers six questions which should help any prospective purchaser, to buy or not to buy:

This book is for youth workers who desire to improve themselves.

It should take about 16 weeks, on average, depending on the time per week available. You need 4 hours per week, to be average.

The course works by dividing each

chapter into headings of, Instructions, Input, Exercise, and Feedback. There are two or three exercises per chapter.

You can do all the exercises on your own, and, because this is not a correspondence course, typical comments have been added at the end of every exercise. This includes the practicals involving others.

You can do the course as a group, if this is preferable.

Pete Ward concludes the introduction by stating that on completion of the course you will have more problems than when you started. Unless you are prepared to commit yourself, put the book back now, it's not for you.

All eight chapters have a similar style suggesting that the authors worked closely when compiling the book. Pete Ward has written the first and last chapters and also chapter five, 'Youth Culture'. I suspect that Peter (the pessimist) is also the driving force within the group, that is if I have understood Judy Levermore's chapter on 'Groups and How They Work'. In this chapter Judy gives her theory and explanation of 'Group Psychology'. Psychology is also the topic in chapter two, 'Interpersonal Skills for Youth Workers', where we take a close look at our ability to communicate and the 'art of conversation'. Only chapter four, 'Telling the Good News', by Judy and chapter eight, 'Worship and Young People', by Peter are specific to Christians. It seems that too much 'Godlyness and Goodlyness' can be detrimental to the cause. The cause of the book is to reverse the drift of young people away from the church, by training older people to go and take an active interest in younger people.

So far I have not mentioned the two chapters by Sam Ward, 'Growing up, The Inside World', and 'Growing up,

The Outside World'. Sam's two chapters total fifty-one pages whilst the others wrote forty-four pages each for their three chapters. The inside world refers to the changes which take place inside a person's body during his life, whilst the outside world refers to the external factors which influence a person's character and moods. These two chapters could easily become a paperback on their own because they cover most of the pains and problems of 'growing up' and how to cope with them.

Pete Ward started by answering six questions; perhaps I should conclude in a similar fashion.

Would I recommend this book? Perhaps.

Would I buy this book? No.

Would I borrow this book? Yes.

Is it useful? Definitely.

Did I enjoy the course? It was like exercising—I enjoy it when it's finished.

Peter Lawrence, Munloch

More than meets the eye: A plain guide to Christianity

Steve Chalke

London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, 124pp, £3.99
ISBN 0 340 64190 8

Anyone who has seen Steve Chalke preaching or as a television presenter will be struck by his winsomeness, clear-thinking and straight-talking. This is exactly what comes across in this plain guide to Christianity.

Chalke shows, in Part One, that he is well acquainted with the popular image of the church as old-fashioned, boring and irrelevant. While he does not deny that some of these criticisms are true, he proceeds to show that Christianity cannot simply be dismissed: there is more to it than meets the eye.

Part Two explores the issues of

Book Reviews

creation and sin before going on, in Part Three, to speak about Jesus, his life, death and resurrection. Consequently, Part Four draws attention to the need to make a choice, explaining that being a Christian involves more than just assent to a set of beliefs. The book concludes with practical help on how to become a Christian, the way to approach the Bible and prayer, the nature of the church and denominations, and the importance of lifetime commitment to following Jesus.

Essentially, this is a presentation of the Gospel, with some apologetic material, say in explaining the nature of Jesus or the case for the resurrection. It is lively and fast-moving, almost as though the author is having an interactive chat with the reader. He writes very sympathetically for unbelievers, without sounding self-righteous or sermonising. There are many good, relevant and witty illustrations. Each chapter is only a few pages, containing sub-headings with bite-size points.

This book is suited for anyone with no knowledge of Christianity. Especially attractive to young people, it deals very fully with Christian doctrine without seeming to do so! Highly recommended.

Fiona Barnard, St Andrews

Discovering Haggai, Zechariah, & Malachi

John James

Leicester, Crossway Books, 1996, 166pp, £4.99

ISBN 1 85684 150 2

This is a very helpful little book. Designed mainly for small group use, it is well laid out and easy to use.

It is the layout throughout the book which makes it so accessible. Each chapter begins with a key thought on the section, followed by what the cover describes; accurately, as a 'concise

summary and lively application'. The questions are particularly helpful. Each chapter ends with three questions; one is aimed at the individual, one at the church, and one at society as a whole. This is where the real strength of the book lies; they can be very personal and direct e.g. 'Who are the oppressed, the widows, the fatherless, the aliens, and the poor in our society today?' There are also two further sections as needed on background and important doctrines e.g. the First and Second Comings (in Malachi) or Visions (in Zechariah).

The methodology of this book makes it useful. That, along with its attractive format, should encourage individuals and groups to get to grips with these three prophets to bring them into mainstream Bible study, and to see how much they have to say to us, to our churches, and to our society.

Rob Jones, Rosskeen

The Message of Proverbs

David Atkinson

Leicester, IVP, 1996, 173pp, £8.99

ISBN 0 85111 166 1

Proverbs must surely rank as one of the most difficult books of the Bible on which to write a commentary. This is not because of its theology, textual problems or contents, but because of the seemingly haphazard and disconnected arrangement of the subject matter. This makes the book somewhat unappealing to both the prospective preacher and reader. So what we want the commentator to do is unravel the threads which we know are there, to give us a key or keys with which to unlock the book and to catalogue the items so as to make access and use easier for us. David Atkinson has done this admirably well and the book makes a fitting addition to 'The Bible Speaks Today' series. Not only has he made a good job of this but

along the way, in the third 'part' of the book, he writes a fine essay which explains his thinking and understanding of Wisdom under the title 'Wisdom's Methods'.

The book is divided into conventional chapters which follow the running order of the text closely and the full text is not reproduced; instead we have an introductory essay on 'The Wisdom of God' followed by six 'parts' each dealing with some aspect of Wisdom and showing how the text brings out these aspects. The first two parts both deal with chs 1-9, but follow different threads. Similarly with chs 10-22, which are dealt with in parts four and five, whilst the concluding part deals with the remaining chapters.

Atkinson's basic thesis is given in his preface, where he tells us 'Wisdom is about helping people to cope; about seeing things in a fresh way which gives new resources for living; and about working out what living for God means in the ordinarieness of daily life.' And the book concludes with a glorious doxology to the Christocentric nature of Wisdom.

Frank Ribbons, Penicuik

For a Better World (A Social Action Guide for Christians)

Richard Adams and Phil Wells

Oxford, Lynx Communications, 1994, 126pp, £8.00

ISBN 0 7459 2682 7

This is not intended to be a book to sit down and read cover to cover, but a resource book, especially for use in church groups, to help Christians work for better social conditions. There is an introductory, background chapter, but the book is not an attempt to outline a biblical or theological basis for involvement, but is for those who want to get on and do something. The background chapter is too brief and superficial to convince anyone

Book Reviews

otherwise minded but will help those whose instincts are along the 'we ought to be engaged in social issues' lines, but who have not worked out a basis for it.

There are then seven further chapters each taking a particular issue: housing and homelessness; the environment; poverty; women; war, violence and peace; marginalised groups; consumer culture. The format of each of these chapters is: a short survey of the issue in short passages and quotations; a collection of readings, discussion points and a short Bible study; a collection of ideas and examples for action; and a list of organisations and resources. The short sections, numerous quotes, clear applied style make this an easy book to use and give plenty of scope to keep a group meeting moving along in a lively purposeful way. Those seeking rigorous debate should look elsewhere: the source of quotations is not given, arguments are not sustained and the Bible study sections are the most disappointing part of the book.

Nevertheless this does fill a gap and is important because for many evangelicals today, the place of a socially engaged Christian faith and lifestyle is acknowledged in principle but too little is done about it. Here is a good resource to address that imbalance.

Gordon R Palmer, Edinburgh

The Masks of Melancholy: A Christian psychiatrist looks at depression and suicide

John White

Leicester, IVP, 1982, 252pp, £4.50

ISBN 0 85110 442 8

John White has put us in his debt by a wide-ranging discussion of depression and suicide. The book is divided into four parts. Part one: Christianity and Mental Illness comprises three chapters: a discussion of the wide variety in types of depression; an

examination of the relationship between sin and disease including the possibility of demonic involvement; and a brief discussion of the nature of mental illness.

The second part of the book, *Science and the Masks*, is composed of two chapters, dealing respectively with some of the tools available to the counsellor, mainly in the form of scales and questionnaires, and some of the many forms of depression and mania.

The third section discusses various theories about depression, takes a closer look at the marvels of the human brain, and, after pointing out that Christians rarely write about or discuss the subject, gives an analysis of various aspects of suicide, including a helpful look at the psychology of suicide.

The final section gives advice on coping with suicidal people and discusses various therapies. An epilogue attempts to dispel the pain and shame often involved in mental illness.

The book has a nine-page glossary of technical terms, eleven pages of notes, and a two-page index.

Dr White is not afraid to confess the failings of psychiatry, but remains convinced of the usefulness, and indeed necessity, of the profession. In the narrative sections the book is easy reading, but some parts get quite technical. Nevertheless ministers and others involved in counselling would find the book enlightening, even though only four pages are actually devoted to pastoral counselling.

Stanley Jebb, Dunstable

How can I lead a friend to Christ?

Michael Green

London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, 131pp, £3.99

ISBN 0 340 64261 0

This is a short but helpful book to assist individual believers to witness to their friends. The scope of the book is

limited to personal witnessing which is one of its major strengths. Michael Green notes that evangelism is a weak point of the contemporary church, 'the task of the church has unconsciously changed from reaching unbelievers to entertaining the Christians'.

The initial chapter deals with the motivation for evangelism which challenges the 'layman' with the fact that 'as politics is too important to leave to the politicians, so evangelism is too important to leave to the clergy'. There are some very helpful hints and encouragements in his chapter on 'Starting the Conversation'. The chapter on 'Knowing the Good News' contains an outline of the core facts of the gospel. Green recognises the fact of the sovereignty of God but also draws our attention to the fact that when friends are converted we are involved in 'becoming the midwife'. The whole witnessing experience is dealt with realistically as he points out the difficulties in handling some typical responses such as the problem of fear and a lack of understanding.

The book has certain weaknesses. There is a helpful outline of the changes in thinking during the last generation. We are shown how society has changed from being concerned first of all with truth, then truth gave way to relevance which has now given way to feeling. Green suggests that instead of challenging this quest for feeling that we accommodate it. One of the illustrations given for witnessing in the present climate is the infamous 'Nine-O-Clock Service' which is seen as an example of an event which draws young people into seeking after Christ. It is also recommended that we do not take certain new converts immediately to the alien environment of the church, although that may say more about certain churches than about Michael Green.

Book Reviews

The book helps us in a situation which is woefully lacking in the 'reformed tradition' i.e. personal evangelism. It is to be recommended.

David C. Meredith, Culloden, Inverness

A Call to Excellence

Paul Beasley-Murray

Chelmsford, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, 228pp, £8.99

ISBN 0 340 63037 X

Paul Beasley-Murray writing from his experience of twenty-five years' ministry as a teacher in Baptist Theological Colleges, both in Africa and England, and Senior Pastor of two prominent Baptist Churches, has produced a book for church leaders that focuses directly on two themes, 'professionalism' and 'excellence'. He

argues that one implies the other and that a significant part of the solution to what he sees as a church and Christian ministry in crisis is a recovery of professional excellence in the ministry. Beginning with a chapter on 'The Professional Pastor' he argues that a Pastor ought to possess gifts as 'Effective Leader', 'Charismatic Preacher', 'Creative Liturgist', 'Missionary Strategist', 'Senior Care-giver' and 'Exemplary Pilgrim'. He writes in an easy style, reflects a breadth of bibliographical material but, because of the comprehensive nature of the topic, inevitably offers tempting tasters rather than in-depth analysis and discussion. He rides one or two hobby horses such as encouraging the Pastor to offer a

liturgical response to almost every conceivable event in life, in a section on 'rites of passage'. I have two basic criticisms:

1. He makes a great deal, rightly, of the place of the Pastor within the ministry of the whole body of Christ yet I sometimes felt overwhelmed by the sheer workload of the Pastor who was to meet the author's standards.

2. More could have been made of the place of the word of God in the Pastor's life than the few pages allotted.

That apart, this is a helpful book from the pen of a prolific writer seeking genuinely to give leadership to today's Church.

Norman Maciver, Aberdeen

The Man of God

Fling him into his room, tear the 'office' sign from his door
and nail on the sign, 'study'.
Take him off the mailing lists.
Lock him up with his books, his computer and his Bible.
Slam him down on his knees before Scripture, before broken hearts,
before the lives of a superficial flock, and before a Holy God.
Force him to be the one man in the community who knows God.
Throw him in the ring to box with God
until he learns just how short his arms are.
Engage him to wrestle with God all the night through,
and let him come out only
when he is bruised and beaten into being a blessing.
Shut his mouth forever spouting pointless remarks.
Stop his tongue forever tripping lightly over every non-essential.
Require him to have something to say before he dares break the silence
and bend his knees in the lonesome valley of prayer.
Burn his eyes with weary study.
Wrack his emotional poise with worry for God.
Make him exchange his pious stance
for a humble walk with God and his people.
Make him spend and be spent for the glory of God.
Rip out his telephone, burn up his files, put water in his petrol tank.
Give him a Bible and tie him to a pulpit,
and make him preach the Word of the living God.
Test him, quiz him, examine him, humiliate him
for his ignorance of things divine.
Shame him for his good comprehension of fine answers,
sports scores and politics.
Laugh at his frustrated effort to play psychiatrist.
Form a choir and raise a song and haunt him with it day and night:
'We would see Jesus'.
And when at last he does come to speak,
ask him if he has a word from God

— if he does not, dismiss him!
Tell him *you* can read the morning paper,
you can digest the TV commentary,
you can think through the day's superficial problems,
you can manage the community's drives,
you can bless the baked potatoes and the green beans
— better than he can.
Command him not to come back until he's read and re-read,
written and re-written,
until he can stand up worn and forlorn and say,
'Yes, thus saith the Lord'.
Break him across the board of his ill gotten popularity;
smack him hard with his own prestige;
corner him with questions about God;
cover him with demands for celestial wisdom;
give him no escape, until he's back against the wall of the Word,
and then sit down before him and listen to the only word he has left:
the Word of God.
Let him be totally ignorant of the down street gossip,
but give him a chapter and order him to walk around it,
camp on it, sup with it
and come at last to speak it backwards and forwards
until all he says about it rings with the truth of eternity.
And when he's burned out by the flaming Word,
when he's consumed at last by the fiery grace blazing through him,
when he's privileged to translate the truth of God to us,
and is finally transferred from earth to heaven,
then bear him away gently, and blow a muted trumpet
and lay him down softly.
Place a two-edged Sword on his coffin,
and raise the tomb triumphant
for he was a brave soldier of the Word;
And 'ere he died,
he had become a
Man of God.

Anon.